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Future
ISSUE 186

I don't think we've seen the full impact of what Monolith managed to achieve with *Shadow Of Mordor* yet, but it must be coming. To my mind its introduction of the Nemesis system is up there with *Batman: Arkham Asylum's* combat as a piece of action game design that should and will be imitated by other developers.

So why the hesitancy? Well, for a start I think there was a lot of scepticism surrounding Warner Bros.'s latest *Lord Of The Rings* tie-in, much as there was when *Arkham Asylum* was about to release. We've been burned pretty frequently by licensed products and *SOM* looked a little too much like *Assassin's Creed* for comfort at times. Once it landed and we could all see its final quality and competency it was clear that Monolith had hit upon a fresh new take on the sandbox action formula.

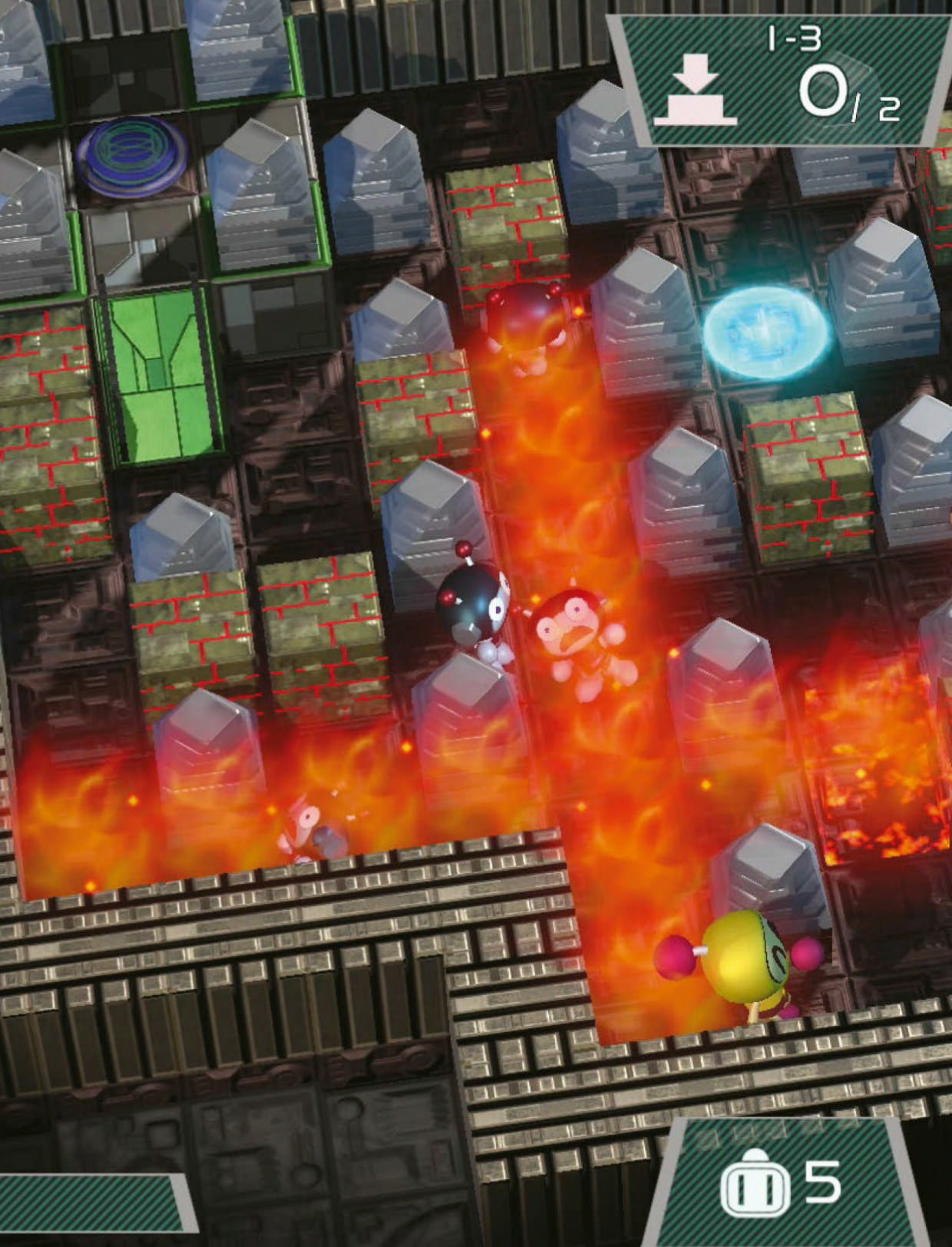
The other issue is that something like the Nemesis system is likely to be far more complex than a parry fighting system. Tapping Triangle or Y to counter an attack and flow in and out of encounters is a simpler prospect than a procedural enemy generator that remembers your actions and attaches narrative beats to those enemies as a result. It's a revelatory concept, bringing an emergent level of narrative to the open world, and it's not likely to be easy.

But it won't be too much longer. An idea like this is too good to be seen in only one franchise. Perhaps it will never be done as well or maybe we'll just get as tired of it as we are of climbing towers to unlock maps, but it's an exciting new concept and one we get into again this issue as we look at *Shadow Of War.*

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR





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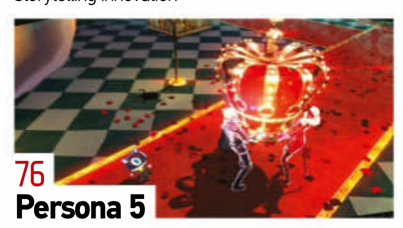
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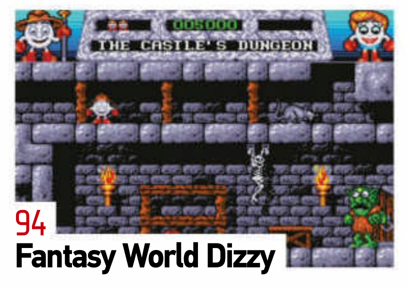



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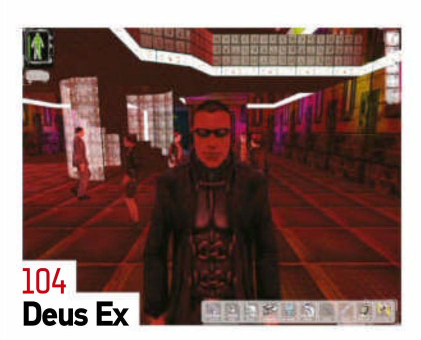

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30 Feature

MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF WAR

Monolith explains how it's building on canon, expanding its Nemesis system and setting a new bar for open-world gaming


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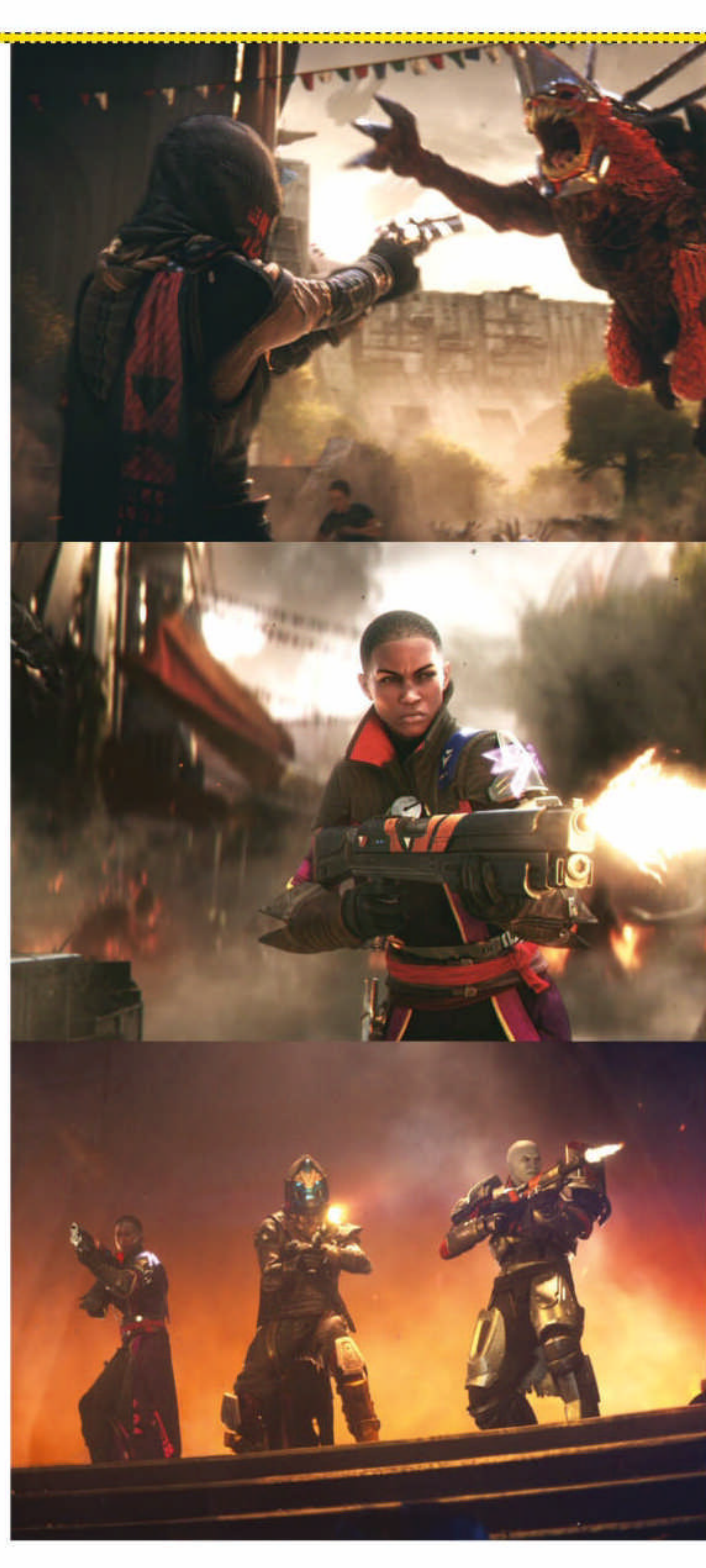
Discuss

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COMBAT EVOLVED

Activision goes to war for 2017 dominance

→ Destiny 2, and a rumoured return to World War II for Call Of Duty, means that this could be a hugely successful year for the publisher. But what does it mean for us, the gamer?



In many respects, Activision Blizzard has had something of a difficult year. *Call Of Duty: Infinite Warfare* failed to attract the critical and commercial reception the publisher so clearly believed it deserved, while *Destiny* continued to fail in its attempts to maintain a consistent beat between launching new content, refreshing in-game events and cultivating a competitive culture. The counter to all of that, of course, is that the acquisition of King Digital continues to pay huge dividends, microtransactions for *Black Ops III* continue to be hugely profitable for the company, while the successful launch of *Overwatch* more than compensated for *Infinite Warfare*'s shortfall in sales.

This has given the company some amount of room to breathe – a little leeway in an increasingly difficult development and marketing environment. Activision is coming into 2017 with the intention of refreshing its two biggest, most profitable, franchises, putting both *Call Of Duty* and *Destiny* through radical changes in an attempt to amend the mistakes of the past and establish a foothold to build from in the coming years.

Say what you will of the game as it exists now, but the *Destiny* that launched in September 2014 is almost unrecognisable in comparison. The launch day experience was soulless, a husk of big ideas burned out by troubled development; masterful FPS gameplay upended by callous world and system design, with the wider narrative and lore stuffed uncomfortably into a companion app experience; the voice acting became a point of consistent embarrassment, Peter Dinklage found himself the subject of meme-ship, for all the wrong reasons. It was nothing short of a mess.

> "Destiny 2 looks bold and exciting, in a way its predecessor could never quite grasp"

The same can't be said for *Destiny 2*. It looks bold and exciting, in a way its predecessor could never quite grasp. Bungie is showing a commitment to answering the problems of *Destiny* in impressive fashion. It has already confirmed that gear and progression will not be making the leap to this September's sequel, ensuring it can make a fresh break as it attempts to circumvent the problems of the past.

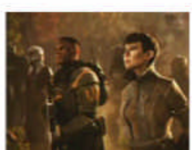
DATA STREAM → BRIAN FARGO HAS SAID HE WILL RETIRE AFTER THE RELEASE OF WASTELAND 3

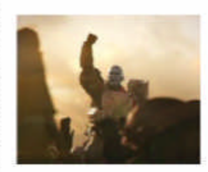

Above *Destiny 2* is being presented as something of a clean start for all players, delivering a brand-new adventure for fresh and existing fans to enjoy with the spectre of the original's problems following it.

It's so simple, but *Destiny 2 sounds* fun. From the start, Activision and Bungie has been quick to position Nathan Fillion's Cayde-6 character to the front and centre of the advertising campaign, and with it a pledge: it says 'we've been listening'. Hearing Cayde-6 in cahoots with vanguard Ikora Rey, voiced by *Firefly* alumni Gina Torres, taking potshots at the original game and its overly serious tone is a massive statement of intent; Bungie is leaning on the chemistry of its characters, pushing to bring more charisma into its world. Guardians have, for the first time, faces and therefore perhaps an iota of personality with them.

Of course, this could be a clever marketing ploy. Carrying this kind of irreverent tone to a final product is (as we've seen demonstrated time and time again in the past) no easy matter – although *The Taken King* expansion has arguably sown the seeds. But it demonstrates that the company is finally willing to give us a war we will be interested in fighting. These giant, sprawling, sci-fi MMO-lite experiences don't need to be sombre lessons in obscurity; masterful lessons in how to induce boredom across familiar fetch quests. They should be confident to crack a smile, to acknowledge the ridiculousness of the endeavour and inject some brevity into a game that you'll no doubt be submerged in for months to come.

While we have had our first taste of *Destiny 2*, and we're already big fans of the direction, *Call Of Duty: WW II* is still a number of weeks away from an official reveal.

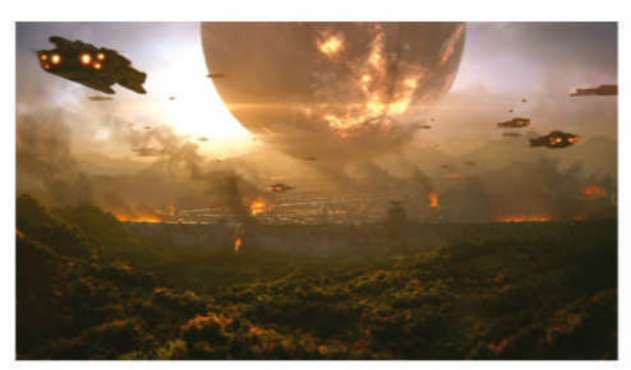

Above Bungie is promising a huge suite of character customisation options, teasing "more options than ever before" to enhance your Guardian's abilities and look.


Above *Destiny 2* will be coming to PC for the first time, launching alongside the PS4, Xbox One and, we assume, Project Scorpio, editions later this year.

At the time of going to print, this is still a rumour at best, but it seems likely that this year will see Sledgehammer Games take *Call Of Duty* back to the World War II-era. Activision has already noted that "traditional combat will once again take centre stage," and that the series will go 'back to its roots' with the *Advanced Warfare* developer entrusted to scale back the parkour, reign in the exosuit-assisted nonsense and bring back a more familiar, far more insular, 'boots on the ground' experience to one of the the industry's biggest blockbusters.

While this move can look cynical in and of itself, coming hot on the heels of EA's massive success with *Battlefield 1*, *Call Of Duty: WW II* (as its rumoured to be called) will likely have been in development for two to three years. The reaction to *Battlefield 1*, not to mention *Infinite Warfare*'s toxic prerelease campaign, is nothing more than affirmation that Sledgehammer is heading in the right direction. "With any long-standing franchise like *Call Of Duty*, there's a balancing act we need to strike between staying true to the things that people love about the franchise and also the need to never become complacent and to keep pushing for innovations to keep the franchise fresh and vital," said Eric Hirshberg, Activision's chief executive in a recent fourth quarter 2016 earnings call. "Last year, I don't think we got that balance right."

That's an incredibly honest statement from Activision and the results are already clear. But we're confident. Activision Blizzard has been able to support *Overwatch* masterfully since its launch, offering a consistent slew of updates, content and promises for the future. It has already demonstrated a commitment to listening to fan feedback, taking *Call Of Duty* back to its roots in an effort to appease fans; and now, here is *Destiny 2*, a game that, seemingly, wants to hit the ground running and avoid the most glaring problems of its predecessor entirely.



Reclaiming its past

What does Call Of Duty stand to gain by going back to World War II?

Judging by the discontent online, it would seem that heading back to the Western Front would make a great deal of sense for Activision – but online chatter can be misleading. This is a bigger risk than it may seem on the surface; *Call Of Duty* only began positioning itself as the true market leader in 2007, as it abandoned the past and took a hold of *Modern Warfare* for the first time. So what is it about World War II that seems so appealing?

Strip back the experience, remove opportunities to get your feet off the ground and place gunfights in a (perceived) sense of reality and suddenly the developer is faced with a very limited scope to work within. This, essentially, means that the focus can move away from Activision's obsession with larger-than-life campaigns and back onto emulating the likes of *Enemy At The Gates*, *Band Of Brothers* and *Saving Private Ryan*.

Resources can, in theory, be diverted from increasing verticality and building physics engines that can appropriately respond to double-jumping theatrics, and instead be used to increase the scale of battlefields and fields of vision. The graphical presentation and intensity of engagements should improve, as too could enemy AI and mission design. This kind of focus could be exactly what *Call Of Duty* needs, not to mention a revelation on the eSports scene, especially if Sledgehammer looks to bring back the arena combat focus of *COD2* to the competitive environment.

Bringing *Call Of Duty* to World War II ensures a smaller, tighter experience; Sledgehammer Games has already demonstrated its proficiency in delivering incredible single-player campaigns with *Advanced Warfare*, and it's exciting to ponder what it will do in such an environment today, given the technology available and the expertise at the studio.



NINTENDO HAS SOLVED THE JOY-CON DESYNC ISSUE, BUT ONLY NEXT SWITCH BATCH WILL BENEFIT



Inset Base building is a fantastic addition to *No Man's Sky*. Now that you've found your way to the centre of the universe, it's time to begin cultivating an existence. It's incredibly intuitive to use, a far cry from the fiddly frustrations of *Fallout 4*'s similar system.

THE SKY'S THE LIMIT

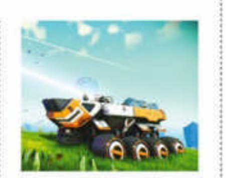
Good things come to those who wait

→ Release day isn't what it used to be. Should developers be given more leeway when it comes to balancing initial quality against an experience that will eventually arrive?

There's a startling trend emerging in the modern industry. What – in 2017 – constitutes as a 'finished game'? Venture a decade back and 'Going Gold' would have been the general adage, the moment that a game transitioned from active development to being printed and pressed. Now, the lines have become blurred, much to the detriment of the early adopter and to the benefit of those able to keep their preorders in their pants for a few extra weeks.

Three 'indie' games stand above the rest in this respect, standing as a testament to the thought that good things come to those who wait: *League Of Legends*, *Minecraft* and, controversially, *No Man's Sky*. While there are plenty of games, too many to list here, that have benefited greatly from the addition of DLC and regular patching (okay, we will name one, and it's *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*), there is a growing number that have improved massively over time, and everybody has benefited. Go back to early reviews of the three aforementioned titles and you'll find games that barely resemble their current form, improved through continuous, dedicated improvements from an impassioned team of creatives.

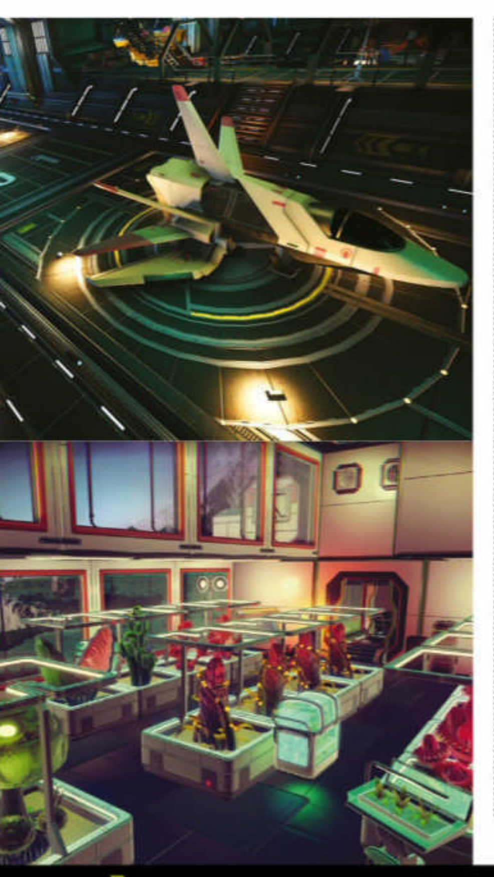
Of course, no game has encountered more furore from the community at large in recent memory than *No Man's Sky*, Hello Games' ambitious space survival simulator that was ultimately derided for numerous perceived misgivings. And yet, after four months of self-imposed silence from the studio, the game received a stunning update. Many will say that Foundation was too little too late, but those people would be doing themselves a disservice. The free patch brought about significant changes to the way in which *No Man's Sky* works, not to mention a host of tweaks and fixes that make the experience more enjoyable overall – closer to the original vision.

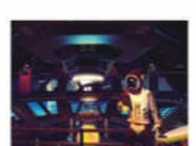


While we are still without certain features, the source of much anger and upset (the understatement of the year) in the months that followed on from August – ringed planets and desert planets are still MIA, (as too is any sign of multiplayer or co-op, we suppose) – the overall product has improved massively. Miyamoto's ancient saying, "A delayed game is eventually good, but a rushed game is forever bad," is becoming less and less relevant by the year. Developers now have the power to drastically alter releases after the fact. Whether you perceive that as a personal slight or as a genuine revelation to an industry too often stifled by indiscretion and arbitrary deadlines is your call, but we're just happy to see developers pledging to continually improve releases in an effort

> "Many will say that Foundation was too little too late, but those people would be doing themselves a disservice"

DATA STREAM → BLOODSTAINED WILL BE COMING TO THE NINTENDO SWITCH INSTEAD OF THE WII U





Above While it can be frustrating holding off on launch, such is the power of hype, many may find that it's worth holding off to receive a greater experience. Going gold doesn't mean what it used to, developers can now work diligently after the fact in an effort to keep fans happy.

to keep them fresh and exciting way after the initial hype dies down.

Take *No Man's Sky*; the recent updates demonstrate that the studio is listening and willing to make improvements. Planet topography is far more varied – worlds with full mountain ranges and flowing rivers can be discovered – as to is the flora, not to mention the weird and wonderful array of animals you are likely to encounter while hunting for ever valuable resources. Thicker clusters of asteroids hang in the sky and the size of interplanetary battles has improved significantly; the ability to intuitively build your own base of operations, take command of huge freighters and even pilot all new Exocraft vehicles across the sprawling open worlds feels like something of a revelation emerging from a cloud of constant vitriol. Add to this a tougher survival mode – giving even more purpose and direction to the moment-to-moment experience – a creative mode for a truly relaxed gaming experience among the stars, the ability to tag landmarks in the wild for further exploration later down the line and new shops and traders, and, well, it means that *No Man's Sky* is in a state many of us simply couldn't have imagined it would be six months ago.

No Man's Sky hasn't received a transformative patch, it's still a survival game with stunning visual presentation and randomisation at its heart, but it shows that Hello Games isn't willing to let years of work go to waste. For better or for worse, it's time to begin altering the way in which we perceive game launches. When *Minecraft* stumbled out of the gate, it was a mess, and now it is the biggest game in the world; *League Of Legends* had humble origins, but it's one of the biggest and most profitable games ever released; and then there is *No Man's Sky*, a game with perhaps the largest *world* in the world – an ever improving experience that's delivering on what it was always supposed to be. And what is that exactly? A survival sim that is suitably 'chilled' – as Hello Games so prominently placed it – to play. A game you can escape into and become lost in the stars; hunting for exotic planets, species and places that *literally* nobody has ever seen before. Hello Games has taken many months to get here, but it's living proof that good things come to those that were willing to wait. Because, after all, you don't lose anything by holding on for a few extra months from launch, and you might just find a better experience waiting if you do.



BLIZZARD IS REMAKING AND REMASTERING THE ORIGINAL STARCRAFT AND BROOD WAR EXPANSION



HOBBYCRAFT

Xbox goes back to school

→ ID@Xbox's new program brings Xbox One's indie credentials full circle

It was back in 2006 when Microsoft released the first version of the XNA Build to aspiring developers with the promise of easy access to PC development tools and the potential to release games on the Xbox 360. This year, ID@Xbox is bringing that process full circle as Microsoft gets set for the launch of the Xbox Live Creators Program, which will soon allow bedroom hobbyists and small studios alike to develop their own games on both Windows 10 and Xbox One with the potential to release their work on both platforms.

Right now the Xbox Live Creators Program is part of the Xbox Insider program as it continues to be finalised and refined, but as ID@Xbox regional lead Agostino Simonetta told us, it's an exciting new step in the ever-evolving face of the platform. "That's how you keep a platform alive and we felt that the time was right to launch something like this," he tells us. "Xbox Live is a very robust network and now we can add more. At the moment we only have a limited amount because we're in the Insider phase. Later in the summer it is going to be open to anybody. The cost is $20 for an individual or $100 for a company and off you go. I think we've learned a lot, and we keep evolving. It's nice to say that we keep evolving, but there are actually tangible acts on our side like the Xbox Game Preview and the Creator Program, you're all seeing that we're delivering on what we say we're going to do."

The launch of XNA directly lead to the creation of the Xbox Live Community Games on Xbox 360 that saw new creations peer reviewed and eventually launched for all to purchase on the console. That storefront would later be renamed Xbox Live Indie Games, which in turn has brought us to the ID@Xbox program in which developers can apply for Xbox One development kits direct from Microsoft at no cost. Simonetta says this journey shows how much Microsoft is listening and empowering game makers. "The great thing today is that at the time, XNA was a self-contained program, now this program exists alongside the ID program. So, if the Xbox Live Creator Program is not enough because you want a dev kit, back then there was not an option but now we have ID@Xbox. Effectively it's an entry point. Your game will be published on Xbox in the Creators Program space. It will be on Windows 10 with the advantage of the full power of the PC. On Xbox it will have some restrictions, but for most titles it will be absolutely fine. And then, if you want a more curated program, you can sign up for ID. So, I think it's far better today because it sits alongside the ID@Xbox program. There is a path and you can choose one or the other, while back then you only had one."

What's more, this sort of initiative opens up the Xbox One and Windows 10 to educational programs. "That was the feedback we got recently in Madrid actually and we always thought that was a good venue that would have been pretty strong, but we had some meetings in Madrid with universities and they're very excited about it," says Simonetta. "I can't speak for all of the universities, but at the couple of meetings I've had, the response has been pretty good."

Expect to see Xbox Live Creators Program get a full launch this summer.

ID@Xbox Stats

→ The Microsoft indie program has been putting up some impressive numbers

1200 DEVELOPERS WITH DEV KITS

450 TITLES LAUNCHED

OVER **1000** GAMES IN DEVELOPMENT

1 BILLION HOURS OF ID@XBOX PLAYED

DATA STREAM → STARBREEZE IS SET TO PUBLISH SYSTEM SHOCK 3 FROM OTHERSIDE ENTERTAINMENT



"There is just so much going on in that game"

SETH SHAIN, ARKANE STUDIOS



WHY I ♥...

DEUS EX

SETH SHAIN, LEAD SYSTEMS DESIGNER, ARKANE STUDIOS

“*A game that was hugely influential to me was the original* Deus Ex*. I was just beginning college when I played it for the first time… there is just so much going on in that game. The narrative was so well told, it’s an amazing immersive sim and it has just got all of these amazing systems; it was full of all of these little moments that were so impactful. It really inspired me.*

It’s been the great pleasure of my career to work very closely with the people responsible for that game for the duration of my career. Harvey Smith, Ricardo Bare, Steve Powers and Marty Martinez, all of these guys all worked on that and they all had a huge influence on me as a developer and me as a player and what I wanted to do. Getting to work with those guys was a dream come true.”

Above: The Inkjet Thrusters are easily one of the best Special weapons in *Splatoon 2*, with torrents of paint pouring out beneath while you launch paint bombs. Each weapon has its weaknesses, though – in this case, you barely move and are easily susceptible to sniper fire.

Splatoon 2

CONCEPT ■ A multiplayer-centric third-person shooter where bullets and explosives are traded for rollers, paint bombs and all-out messy mayhem.

It's squids in as Ninty's paint-slinging shooter returns

The poor old Wii U didn't have many saving graces to its name, but that didn't stop the original *Splatoon* from being one of the best games of the last generation, so we're more than a little excited to wreak more messy mayhem with the Inklings. And we're not disappointed either – if the recent Global Testfire sessions are anything to go by, Switch is set to get its second killer app by the summer.

Did you love the first *Splatoon*? Good, because you'll *love* this one, too. Mainly due to how little the paintballing sequel strays from its predecessor's classic recipe. Turf War, the bread-and-butter mode of *Splatoon 2*, is just as you remember it – high-octane four-on-four action where two teams try and cover a multi-tiered map in as much paint as possible. It's glorious fun, with some short rounds (and the impressively quick loading between lobby and gameplay) making any annoying losses a fleeting memory.

Nintendo has also stirred a few new features into the pot as well, just so it can avoid making *Splatoon 2* feel like an expensive DLC for the first game. Many of the classic weapon sets of the original – including the melee-focused Ink Roller, the all-rounded Splattershot and the sniper-happy Splat Charger – return, but they're now joined by the twin-pistol Splat Dualies. Offering a wider shot arc than the Splattershot, they're ideal for both paint spreading and one-on-one duels. It even comes with a special dodge roll that's noticeably swifter than the turn-into-a-squid-and-escape-via-paint manoeuvre. Expect them to remain a firm fan favourite from here on out.

Each weapon now comes with a unique special ability (acquired, at least in the realm of Turf War, by laying down a paint-based smackdown via a gauge in the top-right corner of the screen), adding a satisfyingly punchy twist to the already hectic action. Getting overwhelmed while playing with Splat Dualies? Click the right stick to jump into the air with an Inkjet Thruster and drop paint bombs from above. Need to take out a clump of enemy Inklings? Hit that stick to lock onto four of them with some deadly Tenta Missiles.

There's also a great danger element to these big moves – should you get splatted

> "Both long-time fans and people who are new to the series can enjoy a fresh new Splatoon experience"
> HISASHI NOGAMI NINTENDO EPD



Above: The returning weapons have been tweaked to make them feel more robust in the heat of a paint-based firefight. Take the humble Splat Roller – it's now been updated to include a mid-air vertical throw of paint.



ARE YOU BEING SERVER-ED?

MECHANICALLY, THIS NEW *Splatoon* runs without a single drop in frames or any major noticeable break in its animations (although we do spy the occasional jaggie), but the weekend-long test phase in late March was fraught with matchmaking problems. Most of the time our matches flowed without issue, but we found ourselves trapped in a lobby that was unable to fully populate itself (and ultimately time out and kick us) more often than we were comfortable with. Thankfully, *Splatoon 2* will bring local multiplayer to the series for the first time (so you can team up and get your amateur eSports on), but its netcode still needs to be rock solid by the time it launches in the summer.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Switch
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Nintendo EPD
Release: Summer 2017
Players: 1-8

Developer Profile

One of the internal studios at work within Nintendo's Kyoto headquarters (and one of the newest, having only been established in 2015), Nintendo EPD has one seriously eclectic resume, including three *Zelda* entries and a couple of contributions to *Animal Crossing*. Expect a lot more cuteness with *Splatoon* 2 then.

Developer History

The Legend Of Zelda: Tri Force Heroes **2015 [3DS]**
Star Fox Zero **2016 [Wii U]**
Super Mario Run **2016 [iOS, Android]**
The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild **2017 [Switch]**

High Point

What higher point can there be than the greatest *Zelda* game ever coded? *Breath Of The Wild* marks Nintendo's big mission statement for Switch, and Nintendo EPD was right there in the thick of its development.

before activating it, you'll lose all your progress and have to start over. Paired with the classic flitting between emptying your paint reserves and refilling them as a squid, each lightning-fast round now feels that bit more intense. Sure, *Splatoon 2* looks and plays awfully familiar, but these extra little tidbits make the whole experience even more rewarding. Plus, jumping up into the air and slamming back down with a huge paint-filled Splashdown shockwave when you're about to get swamped never gets old.

The two maps shown off in the Global Testfire – The Reef and MuscleForce Fitness – aren't a great departure from those featured in the original. Each one has a raised 'home' area for each team that the opposing one can't physically reach, with a central, multi-tiered arena full of ramps and barriers in the middle. The Reef's open-air skate park/shopping district makes for an intense labyrinth of bridges to splat, while MuscleForge Fitness' crossfit-aping aesthetic brings an enclosed feel that offers plenty of close-quarters encounters. Numerous raised platforms also cater to the sniper crowd – it's just a shame the Splat Charger still feels unintuitive compared to *Splatoon 2*'s other weapon choices.

Considering how poorly the Wii U sold, Nintendo's brilliant foray into the world of online shooters didn't get the exposure and the audience size it deserved. So the Switch is still riding the hype wave of its March launch, there's never been a better time to reacquaint yourself with the Inklings and their paint-loving showdowns. As long as Nintendo uses the data from this open beta phase to iron out any matchmaking problems before launch, *Splatoon 2* will shoot its way to classic status in no time.



Above: You can do a Super Jump as well – simply open the map with X and press a direction on the D-pad to leap into action. Below: Each weapon is part of a set, including the primary weapon, a subweapon and a special. To use the subweapon, simply hit the R button.



This is not a game that's afraid of ramping everything up to 11 when it comes to explosions, lasers and death.

LEGION OF DOOM

TO PUT IT lightly, *Agents Of Mayhem*'s narrative foundations make *Deadpool* look like a serious take on life. Things begin with an attack that subsequently came to be known as 'Devil's Night', the super villain organisation LEGION attacking armies and economies with the help of a teleportation technology they created.

With the world in panic, a former LEGION minion, Persephone Brimstone, is tasked with putting together MAYHEM in a bid to deflect the attacks and restore balance to the world. This group is made up of individuals that society has deemed less than affable, resulting in a battleground populated on both sides by the kind of characters you'd expect to be on the wrong end of Superman's fist or Thor's hammer.





Agents Of Mayhem

CONCEPT A third-person shooter with a strong focus on experimenting with team combinations in order to develop your own playing style.

A battle of bad versus evil

There are no 'good guys' in *Agents Of Mayhem*, all of the primary characters being ones other games would typically task you with killing. An evil organisation has attacked the world, and so the world has turned to a load of baddies, played by you, to restore order. That's the setup.

Thankfully, the details of interaction are much more complicated and offer a greater means for *Mayhem* to express and differentiate itself. On paper it could be accurately described as an open-world third-person shooter, but such labels fail to communicate the character switching system that is its core concept and point of interest.

Prior to the start of missions you are asked to select three agents to take into the field from a group of misfits that include a drunken roller derby player, a disgraced ex-military officer and an obnoxious reality TV star. Only one agent can be used at a time, but you can instantly switch between them at a press of a button as often as you like. This is an ability explained away, in the vaguest terms, as a 'teleportation technology' that happens to exist in this vision of a futuristic Earth.

The switching provides numerous tactical options for approaching combat situations that tend to rest on the more extreme end when it comes to quantity of enemies, explosions and general carnage. You might choose to select your agents with a view to having a diverse range of abilities at your disposal, bringing in those that between them cover short, medium and long-range possibilities. Or you might load up solely on immediate damage dealers or sneakier snipers so that you can concentrate your firepower towards a specific approach.

In a sense the teleportation concept is an extension of the more common idea of allowing players to select loadouts, with your arsenal here determined by a choice of characters rather than guns. Team choices are made more important, however, by the abilities and narrative exposition coupled with them.

Once you've built up a dedicated meter you can unleash a special 'Mayhem' ability, each agent owning one that works best in different situations. Some are better used when surrounded by many enemies, others are effective at dealing with fewer, but more powerful, individuals.

Agent Hollywood, the reality TV star, for instance, can summon bombs that explode all around him whilst simultaneously enjoying unlimited ammo and increased firing rate for a short while. This becomes an extremely powerful Mayhem ability for those times in which you find yourself surrounded.

Roller derby superstar Daisy, on the other hand, deploys a Mayhem attack that can damage a single enemy quickly. When triggered her standard minigun becomes more powerful and easier to aim at smaller targets, which is great when you're facing down a boss packing a lot of hit points.

Your team decisions also play a part in what dialogue you hear during missions and, in turn, this can impact how you interpret the tone of certain events and missions and the wider narrative. Daisy is frequently drunk and her lines play into that, while Hollywood tends to make everything about himself and, as a result, makes you feel more like a stereotypical action star. Fortune, a Colombian pirate, is feistier and comes packed with wittier quips than the others, the thematic sensation having a more roguish, sarcastic quality.

Whatever your preferred trio, the activities presented to you remain the same. Main quests define the critical path, with side missions revolving around destroying this or rescuing that, obtaining a treasure or killing a foe. Those with an interest in obtaining every resource with a view to upgrading abilities to their maximum will want to pay close attention to these side missions as they appear.

Given the wider comedic tone, the open-endedness of the environment and potential for varying playing styles, there's a strong hint of *Borderlands* about *Agents Of Mayhem*; the key difference between the two being that loot has been replaced by the ability to switch characters on the fly. Such a comparison is no bad thing, and with Volition's history, which covers the *Red Faction* and Saints Row series, there's little reason the studio shouldn't be setting sights on sitting alongside such a well-respected peer.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin: USA
Publisher: Deep Silver
Developer: Volition
Release: 18 August 2017
Players: 1

Developer Profile

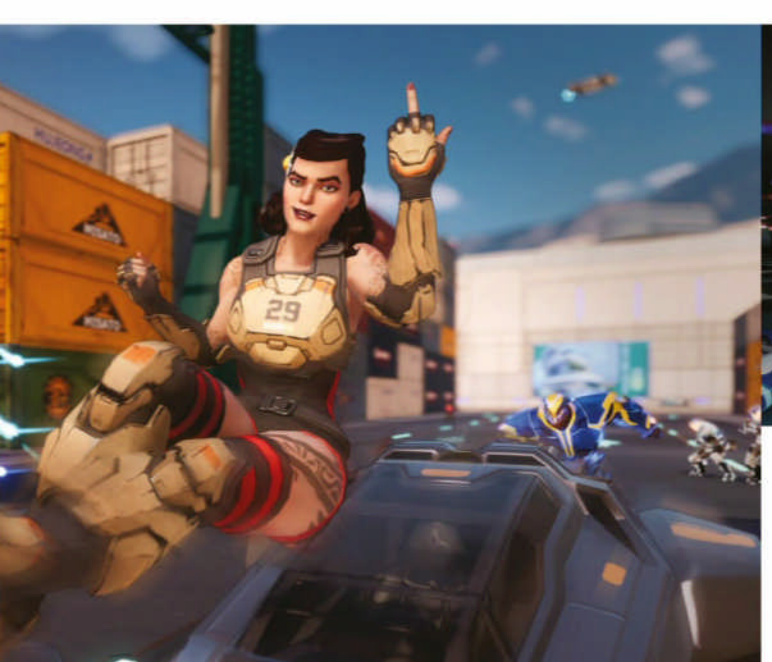
Volition has long specialised in the creation of open-world environments, the studio then filling those spaces with the tools and means for the player to create carnage. Prior to the launch of *Saints Row*, Volition's games had been fairly serious in tone and content, but the Illinois-based team has found its groove in the production of outlandish characters undertaking wacky, surreal goals.

Developer History

FreeSpace: The Great War **1998 [PC]**
Red Faction **2001 [Multi]**
Saints Row **2006 [Multi]**
Saints Row IV **2013 [Multi]**

High Point

Red Faction opened many eyes regarding what is possible when it comes to environmental destruction across an open-world setting and gave Volition a reputation as an innovator.





Above: While it makes sense to define your team composition based on how their skills compliment one another, it's almost impossible not to be swayed into a decision by gravitating towards those character designs you like most.

"We saw some titles, which didn't have a very good launch because of a lack of content"
KATSUHIRO HARADA BANDAI NAMCO

Tekken 7: Fated Retribution

CONCEPT ■ *Tekken 7* adds some new systems to its extremely popular 3D fighting base and looks to dethrone Capcom as the king of the fighters.

Bandai Namco has Tekken its sweet time, but it's almost upon us

It has been out in Eastern arcades and doing the rounds of the tournament scene for a few years now – we all know *Tekken 7* is a very good and exciting videogame that shows a real return to form for the series – and with a June release date finally set in stone it is almost time for the latest entry in the biggest-selling fighting game franchise to return to home consoles, and for the first time, PC.

Fated Retribution is the latest iteration of *Tekken 7*, which not only included some character balancing adjustments but also a considerable graphical update that puts it in line with most next-gen games and especially its direct competition.

Speaking of direct competition, one of the things that Bandai Namco is keen to avoid is the perception that it has launched an unfinished product – something that has hung around recent fighting game releases like a bad smell – and *Tekken 7* is set to ship with not only the obvious multiplayer and training options, but also a considerable single-player portion. The ongoing family feud between Heihachi and Kazuya Mishima – which, frankly, has gotten well out of hand – again provides the backdrop for the fighting action to a separate story mode, as well as an arcade mode.

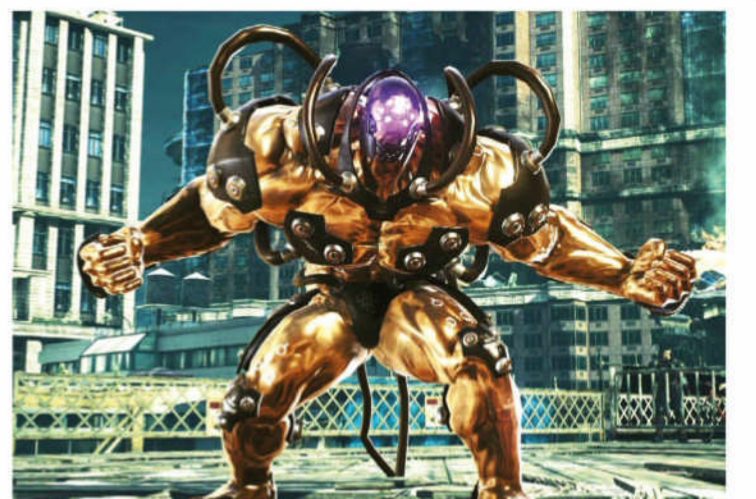
Of course, that's all fine and good, but if the actual fighting doesn't hold up then *Keeping Up With The Mishimas* is all for nothing. *Tekken 7* adds a few new systems to the core 'four buttons, four limbs' combat that *Tekken* has dealt in since day one.

Rage Arts, which are ostensibly *Street Fighter*'s Supers, are available when you're in the final quarter of your health bar and provide a hugely-damaging and spectacular attack that can turn the tide of battle in your favour. The other new addition is Power Crushers, moves that have high and mid attack armour, meaning they will break through any attack except low strikes, and hit your opponent. There's a lovely slow-motion effect that appears when there's two moves that could trade against one another, showing the one that lands first and really ramps up the excitement in a close match – a crucial factor, given the rise in eSports and fighting games in the past few years. *Tekken 7* is, even at this early stage, great to watch.

With series favourite Eddy Gordo recently being announced and – apparently – a few characters still left to name-drop before release, it's going to be an exciting few months to be a *Tekken* fan. *Tekken 7* has been a while coming, but there's not Lei Wulong left to go now. Sorry.



■ Above: Brilliantly, the Akuma in *Tekken 7* is much more like traditional Akuma than the one that has appeared in recent *Street Fighter* titles.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Arcade, Xbox One, PC
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Bandai Namco
Developer: In-house
Release: 2 June 2017
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

The ever-colourful Katsuhiro Harada has been the project producer on every instalment of *Tekken* to date, transitioning into a series figurehead in recent years, doing more public appearances as the 'face' of *Tekken*. Also, has a friendly rivalry with Yoshinori Ono, *Street Fighter's* producer.

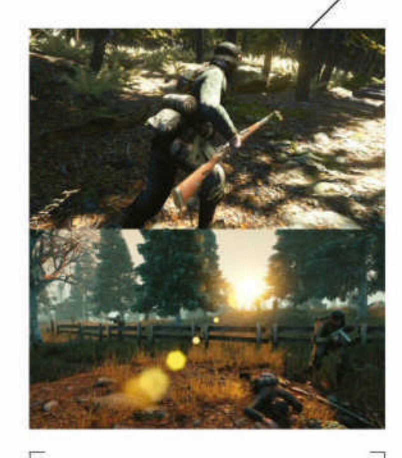
Developer History

Tekken
1994 [PSone, Arcade]
Tekken 3
1997 [PSone, Arcade]
Street Fighter X Tekken
2012 [Xbox 360, PS3]
Pokken Tournament
2015 [Wii U, Arcade]

High Point

Series high point and PlayStation classic, *Tekken 3* is the single biggest-selling fighting game of all time, unless we're including *Smash Bros Brawl*, which we're not.





Above: Built in Unreal Engine 4, *Battalion 1944* is already looking to be one of the prettiest shooters for 2017. Bulkhead Interactive is, once again, proving that you don't need a triple-A development size team to produce a quality, beautiful release.

"Battalion 1944 is an infantry-based first-person shooter with an emphasis on raw skill. No grinding, no exosuits, just you and your skill as a player."
PRESS RELEASE BULKHEAD INTERACTIVE

Battalion 1944

CONCEPT Upstart studio Bulkhead Interactive is going old school with *Battalion 1944*, a multiplayer-only shooter for those that miss the golden age of FPS gaming.

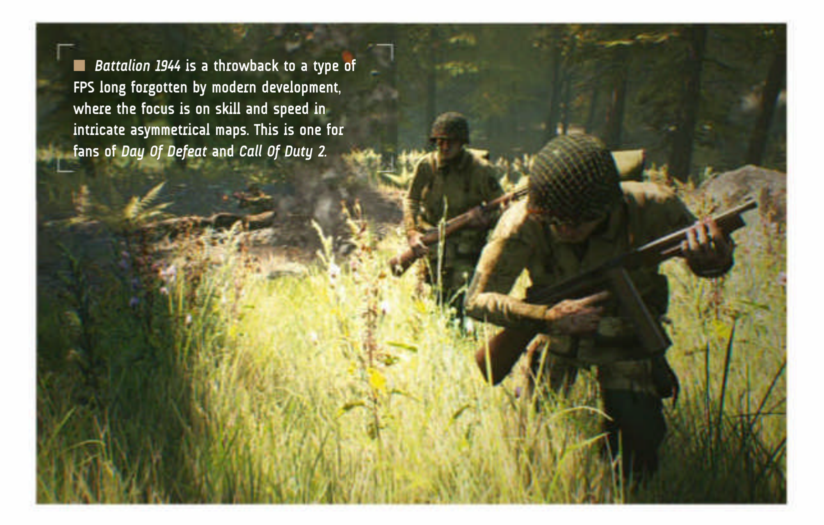
Fighting the good fight

Here is a love letter to a certain type of first-person shooter, one long abandoned by an industry so abhorrently focused on trampling all over its roots in an effort to seize control of the future of warfare. Bulkhead, however, is eager to move away from the exosuits, perks and parkour that dominate the genre today, opting to focus on the same design tenets that made *Call Of Duty 2*, *Day Of Defeat* and *Medal Of Honor* so enjoyable over a decade ago.

A year on from the completion of its successful Kickstarter campaign – with 10,000 backers pledging over $450,000 to the multiplayer shooter – and *Battalion 1944* has secured itself a publisher, with Bulkhead teaming back up with Square Enix's Collective division following a successful partnership in 2016 for *The Turing Test*. The FPS is aiming to capture what Bulkhead calls, "The core of classic multiplayer shooters," whilst utilising advanced industry technology, such as Unreal Engine 4, motion-captured animations and physically-based rendering – tools that just weren't available during the heyday of World War II shooters – to create a classic shooter for the modern era.

Ultimately, *Battalion 1944* will live and die by its "down-the-barrel" feel – as Bulkhead likes to call it, drawing heavily from *Call Of Duty 2* for inspiration – though that will be no easy task. While the classic WWII shooters are remembered for their incredibly-tight asymmetrical map design and large array of authentic weaponry, it's the feel of those weapons that often gets overlooked or forgotten. Between weapons like the Thompson, Kar98 and the M1 Garand, each and every SMG and single-shot rifle in those genre games handled uniquely and demanded skill to appropriately wield; capturing that spirit will be the most difficult task in front of Bulkhead, plenty have tried to echo the gun-feel and handling of an Infinity Ward shooter and many have failed.

But then there is something appealing in the raw ambition alone. *Battalion 1944* knows its niche and seems to be slipping into it perfectly. With the last *Call Of Duty* game to be set in WWII being 2008's *World At War*, there's a huge appetite for this type of experience from certain corners of the community. *Battalion 1944* is going to launch later in 2017 with dedicated servers and will employ anti-cheat measures in an effort to create a fair field of combat – something *Call Of Duty 2* always struggled with – while initial QA tests are being opened to the public as Bulkhead tries to lock its game balance and netcode down. Any players lamenting the lack of skill-based, old-school multiplayer shooters – the type of which were in abundance around the launch of the Xbox 360 – will surely feel at home in the antiquated battlegrounds of *Battalion 1944*.



Battalion 1944 is a throwback to a type of FPS long forgotten by modern development, where the focus is on skill and speed in intricate asymmetrical maps. This is one for fans of *Day Of Defeat* and *Call Of Duty 2*.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, PC, Xbox One
Origin: UK
Publisher: Square Enix Collective
Developer: Bulkhead Interactive
Release: 2017
Players: TBC

Developer Profile

Bulkhead was born from the merger between two UK indie studios, Deco Digital and Bevel Studios. The partnership began in an effort to get *Pneuma: Breath Of Life* out of the door, one of the first console titles to ship built on Epic's Unreal Engine 4.

Developer History

Pneuma: Breath Of Life **2015 [PS4, PC, Xbox One]**
The Turing Test **2016 [PS4, PC, Xbox One]**

High Point

Pneuma: Breath of Life was an intriguing first-person puzzler that demonstrated the power of the Unreal Engine on console, with the teams displaying a great deal of skill and ambition to get it out in 2015.





■ Left: As it stands, *Dirt 4* is lacking a little of the triple-A polish exhibited by its racing brethren, but what it's doing on the track is far more important. The handling from *Dirt Rally* feels as good as ever.



Dirt 4

CONCEPT ■ This seeks to combine the thrills and realism of *Dirt Rally* with the fearless fun and excitement previously seen in *Dirt 2* and *Dirt 3*.

Play your way

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, PC, Xbox One
Origin: UK
Publisher: Codemasters
Developer: In-house
Release: 9 June 2017
Players: TBC

Developer Profile

Codemasters is one of the oldest British game studios. Founded in 1986, the legendary outfit has gone on to develop some of the most famous franchises of all time, including *Colin McRae Rally*, the *Dizzy* series, *Operation Flashpoint* and many more. Codies will live forever.

Developer History

F1 2011 **2011 [Multi]**
Grid 2 **2013 [Multi]**
Grid Autosport **2014 [Multi]**
Dirt Rally **2015 [Multi]**

High Point

Dirt Rally was a true achievement for Codemasters, demonstrating that the studio still had an acute understanding of the racing sim genre and its fans to deliver a compelling experience both on and off the road.

You have to hand it to Codemasters, the developer has never been one to rest on its laurels. 2015's rally sim *Dirt Rally* was a resounding success, but it made the future look unclear for the *Dirt* franchise – one focused more heavily towards entertaining the mainstream more so than maintaining weight transfer limits of your favourite off-road vehicles. But then here we have *Dirt 4*, one of the most exciting rally games to ever drift on to the track.

It is, in fact, the tracks that make this impending June 2017 release so appealing. Fans of *Dirt Rally*'s real-life stages look away, as you're about to be horrified, *Dirt 4* is ditching reality and moving in favour of fantasy as it introduces a new feature called Your Stage, a system that lets players build their own racing stages. Oh, that's right! *Dirt 4* is going procedural.



Given that *WRC* and *Gran Turismo* are sweeping up as many of the rights to the legendary tracks as possible, perhaps this should come as no surprise. What *is* a surprise, however, is how convincing Your Stage actually is. It's as simple as setting a series of parameters and *Dirt 4* does the magic for you, creating enjoyable and engaging tracks that can then later be shared with friends and enjoyed by others. In many ways, procedural track generation is perfect for rally games. Off-road racing is, after all, about dealing with a constantly surmounting challenge, facing the dangers of the road less travelled and navigating by instinct (and codriver hollering) alone. It ensures that racing a track in *Dirt 4* is exciting every time, for you know not what dangers are hiding around every brutally sharp corner. So long as the procedural generation continues to keep things fresh – without becoming a detriment to trackside detail – then it could be exactly what Codemasters needs to penetrate the market fully.

Elsewhere, *Dirt Rally* fans will be delighted to see that the handling model arrives here pretty much intact, although Codemasters has introduced a much more forgiving handling system if you feel like you need to put the brakes on the heavy simulation side of things. Codemasters has had to walk the line here, appealing to the hardcore fans while maintaining accessibility to keep the casual driving fans involved. Early testing seems to indicate that it's walking that line well but, as always with these kinds of things, it's difficult to know for certain until we get our hands on the final product. Still, there's plenty to like in *Dirt 4*. Best-in-show off-road car control of *Dirt Rally* meets procedural tracks that actually *work* – Codemasters may just have another winner on its hands here.

> "Your Stage [is] an innovative rally route creation tool that allows you to produce an almost-infinite number of unique stages at the press of a button"
>
> PRESS RELEASE CODEMASTERS

"Being constantly compared to the current slew of colourful shooters on the market made us realise we needed to stand out from the crowd"

CLIFF BLESZINSKI BOSS KEY PRODUCTIONS

LawBreakers

CONCEPT ■ It's low-gravity shooter mayhem as the Law and the Breakers compete for dominance. This is a hero shooter with a mean streak.

■ Above: Aegis and Nash are two of the newer additions to the game offering a secondary tank option for the Law and Breaker sides. Each is equipped with a potent shotgun, secondary blade weapon and heavy shield ability, making them great defensive and choke-point picks.

The hero shooter that emphasises the shooting

It really feels as if *LawBreakers* has been gradually finding its identity as time progresses. That's not to suggest that Cliff Bleszinski and the Boss Key team didn't have a clear vision for the game when it kicked things off, but it has been open to evolving and shifting its focus as new strengths and weaknesses are revealed by constant playtesting. For example, the team realised that its plan to release *LawBreakers* as free-to-play was incompatible with the kind of balanced shooter experience it wanted players to enjoy at launch, so it dropped the idea. More recently we've seen it in the classes being added to the game.

Case in point is the Juggernaut, which on the surface would appear to be another tank class on top of the Titans already revealed for the game, but where they offer explosive medium-range combat, Aegis and Nash are close-quarters fighters with shield abilities. Additionally, we have a medic in the game now, something that we understood Boss Key was resisting. However the Combat Medic is a little different from your typical healer – they're followed by two drones who can be sent out to heal comrades, can move around the map with hover packs and use a grenade launcher as their primary weapon.

We've seen first hand how the team iterates and builds on its classes, starting with gameplay performance first and then building its characters out from there. Some have tended to feel that this leaves *LawBreakers*' heroes lacking in the personality stakes, but we tend to think that it rather puts the gunplay and game modes front and centre. This is a hero shooter, without question, but one where the character is playing second fiddle to the gameplay. It's about your personality coming through how you use and switch between these classes rather than the characters imposing their style too heavily on you.

This is probably what Bleszinski has been trying to get at when he says he wants this to be a hero shooter for the *Call Of Duty* crowd. We've seen in that series how preset character types have actually added flair to multiplayer and helped refine the game, rather than turn it into something new. *LawBreakers* sits somewhere between that approach and Blizzard's with *Overwatch*.

The concern remains that *LawBreakers* will carve too small a niche to really succeed. However, for us, it's the approach to game modes with refreshing takes on capture the flag and king of the hill that will ultimately prove this game's worth. Constant action and the potential for massive swings of fortune are built into these modes and that promises to make this a thrilling experience with every new matchup.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: USA
Publisher: Nexon
Developer: Boss Key Productions
Release: TBC 2017
Players: TBC

Developer Profile

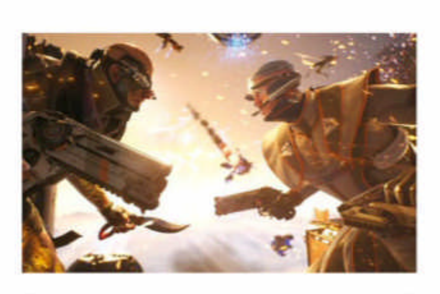
Cliff Bleszinski needs little introduction since he's been at the forefront game design for the last 20 years. Boss Key, however, is a studio built with his game design philosophy running through it and this is its first release.

Developer History

Jazz Jackrabbit **1994 [PC]**
Unreal Tournament **1999 [Multi]**
Gears Of War **2006 [360]**
Bulletstorm **2011 [Multi]**

High Point

Gears Of War is likely to be Bleszinski's most impactful release as it set several bars for games at the time. It heralded a new era of visuals and its gameplay became the base for third-person combat.



■ Above: We've seen some of the concepting phase for the Gunslinger class at Boss Key and its vision of a cyberpunk angel and devil has developed rather nicely.



SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

1


2


3


4


5


OLD MAN'S JOURNEY

Format: **TBC**
Publisher: **Broken Rules**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBC 2017**

1 This beautifully-styled puzzler has been on the convention circuit for a while now picking up buzz with its peculiar tale of an old man who, you guessed it, is on a journey. There are three key factors to why it's such a fascinating release – first, the artwork is gorgeous with something of a storybook illustration feel. Second is the puzzling mechanic that sees you manipulate the environment to create a path, dragging items around to see what new routes it creates – it's simple, but it makes the world tactile and invites a lot of investigation. Third is the story itself, which rarely for a game, will ponder issues of ageing, memory and more.

MAYHEM IN SINGLE VALLEY

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Fluxscopic Ltd**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBC**

2 As a RPG that attempts to mix the fantastical with the everyday, *Mayhem In Single Valley* is a fascinating hybrid of concepts. It's a game in which your task is to try and leave town, but having witnessed a strange attack, hero Jack has other issues to deal with, too. It's a game in which you can use a tissue to grab a spider out of a bathtub and then choose to flush it or set it free, but also one where you can dodge lightning bolts and get your throat chewed on by squirrels. There's all sorts of interesting things going on, not least of which is an apparent karma system and a structure that reminds us of classic *Zelda*, only set in someone's backyard.

SUPER CLOUDBUILT

Format: **PS4, Xbox One, PC**
Publisher: **Double Eleven**
Developer: **Coilworks**
ETA: **Q2 2017**

3 Following the release of the original *Cloudbuilt* in 2014, Double Eleven and Coilworks have teamed up to develop this remaster and what the pair describe as the definitive edition of the experience with changes from core gameplay all the way up. At its heart this is a fast-paced sci-fi shooter with heavy parkour and 3D *Prince Of Persia* influences as you wall-run, slide and leap your way around impossible-looking environments with robots and turrets attacking from all sides. We have to say the sketchy cell-shaded style adds both to the visual appeal and chaotic look of the game. It's a whirl of speed and colour that is likely to suck you in quickly.

SONGBRINGER

Format: **PS4, Xbox One, PC**
Publisher: **Double Eleven**
Developer: **Wizard Fu**
ETA: **Q2 2017**

4 On the surface *Songbringer* might look like a par for the course indie RPG. Classic *Zelda* camera positioning, mixture of fantasy and sci-fi setting. Pixel art, of course, which reminds us a lot of *Sword & Sworcery EP*. It's not far off other attempts of this ilk, like *Hyper Light Drifter*. There are a couple of important differences, though, like the fact that the game is procedurally generated and each version of the game can be recreated by inputting the 'seed'. It also has a sense of humour, reminding us a little of Capybara's game, with a hero who loves to party, a robot companion and the ability to craft a flaming top hat weapon.

WARTILE

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Playwood Project ApS**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBC 2017**

5 We love a diorama and this offers some of the most detailed we've seen in some time. Aping tabletop combat, but looking to speed it up somewhat and really deliver some digital flash, *Wartile* mixes a little strategy gameplay with TCG mechanics as you build a deck of cards and figurines to take into battle, and cooldowns dictate how often you can play new abilities or 'Godly' cards (which seem to result in larger effects on the board). Your figures can also be upgraded as you play with new armour, weapons and stat tokens. So long as the different stages offer enough tactical variety we can see this eating up plenty of hours.

MIDDLE-EARTH™

SHADOW OF WAR™

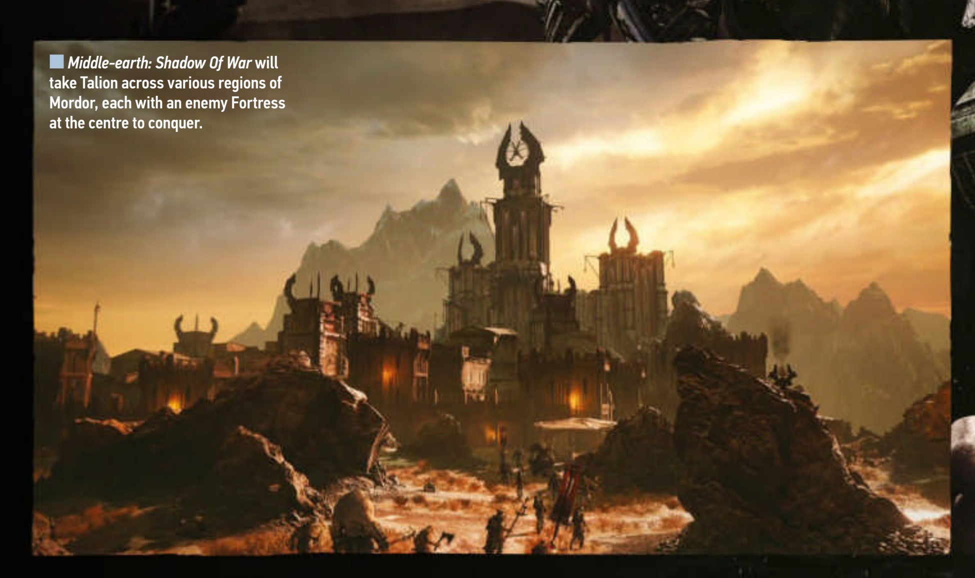
GAMES™ SITS DOWN WITH MONOLITH TO DISCUSS ITS MOST AMBITIOUS GAME TO DATE, MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF WAR – A NEW BREED OF OPEN-WORLD ACTION GAME THAT CASTS YOU AS THE STAR OF YOUR OWN TOLKIEN-INSPIRED ADVENTURE

How do you create an original story within one of the most analysed, celebrated and scrutinised works of fantasy of all-time? It's simple, you don't build just one, you build *thousands.*

Monolith Productions – much like JRR Tolkien himself – is in the business of 'mythopoeia', of establishing myth and of cultivating adventure within the war-ravaged land of Middle-earth. Set in the six-decade window between *The Hobbit* and *The Lord Of The Rings*, Monolith seized the space it needed when it came to creating 2014's *Shadow Of Mordor* – even if it meant treading on so much of the entrenched lore and tone that was established by Tolkien so many decades ago. Not that it sees much of a problem with that.

"*Lord Of The Rings* is kind of like a religion," says Kevin Stephens, studio head at Monolith, already having to deal with questions surrounding the canonical placement of *Middle-earth: Shadow Of War*, which sees Sauron returning to physical form to fight off a new threat: the Bright Lord of Mordor, equipped with an all-new Ring of Power forged in the fires of Mount Doom. "Different people interpret the canon in different ways. If you look at the end of *The Hobbit* – even if you just look at the movies – Sauron is there in physical form and then when you get to *Lord Of The Rings* he is this eye in the tower. So what happened? We hope to answer the question," he says with a smile, announcing the return of dual protagonists Talion, a Ranger seeking revenge for his fallen family turned Bright Lord, and Celebrimbor, the ancient Elf master craftsman he inadvertently fused with. "The way we look at it is this," he continues, "what happens in Mordor stays in Mordor! Nobody knows what happened in the 60 years between the end of *The Hobbit* and the beginning of *The Lord Of The Rings* – there are a lot of incredible stories that we feel happened in Mordor that we are trying to tell."

But that's the beauty in building myth; it is ultimately open to interpretation and manipulation. In *Shadow Of War* you too are able to become a master of mythopoeia, free to forge your own destiny in the shadow of Barad-dûr. With a vastly expanded Nemesis system and a renewed focus on procedural, personalised storytelling, *Shadow Of War* has the potential to tell a tale greater than that of any of Tolkien's, because it is yours to create and yours alone to enjoy. But to appreciate just how *Shadow Of War* is positioning itself to solve some of the biggest problems in open-world gaming, you first need to understand the system at the heart of the experience.



Middle-earth: Shadow Of War **will take Talion across various regions of Mordor, each with an enemy Fortress at the centre to conquer.**



WHY WASN'T THE NEMESIS SYSTEM RIPPED OFF?

Theft is never cool, however many people are demanding that system should be iterated on

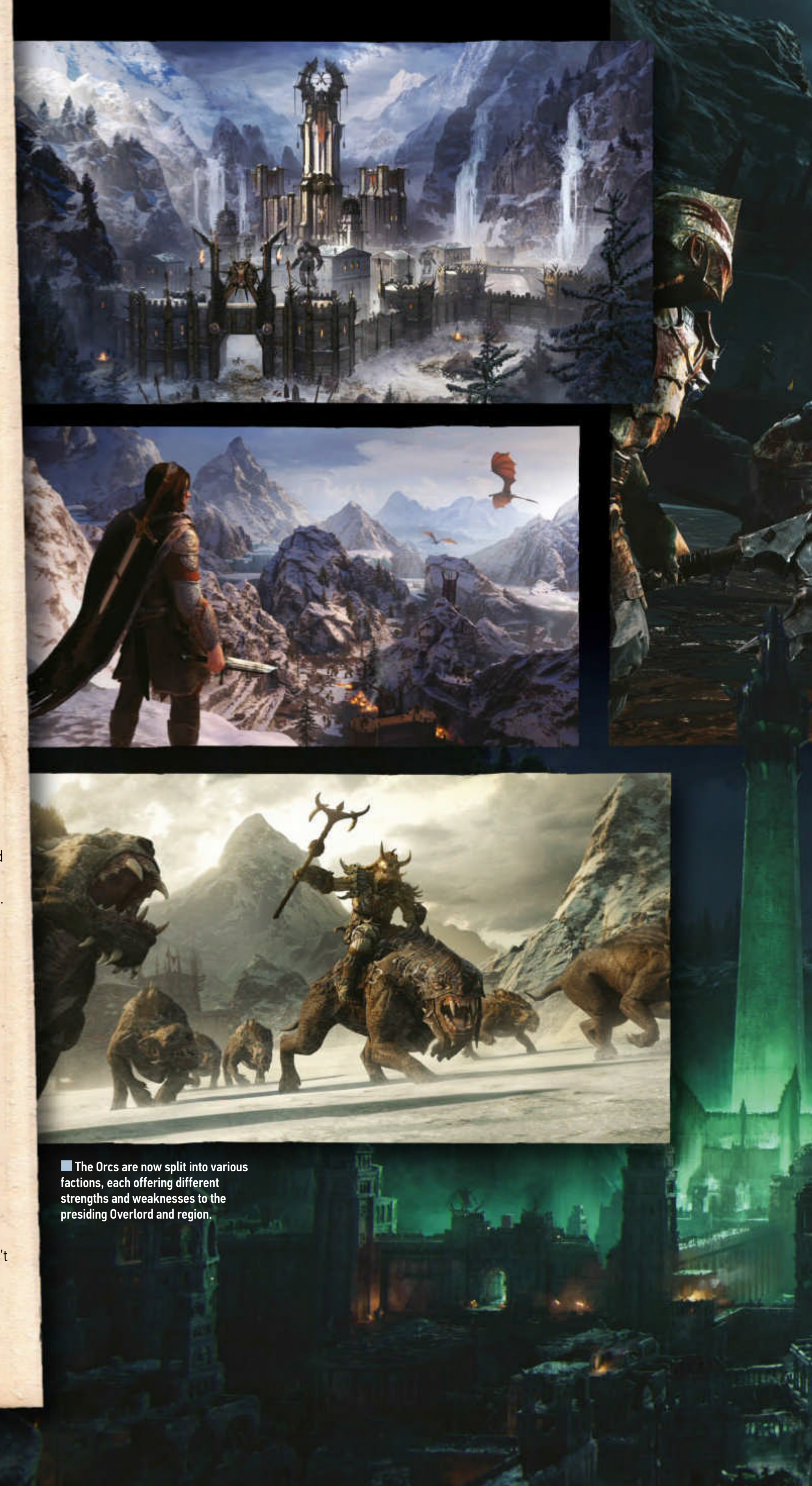
"I get asked this question a lot," laughed Kevin Stephens, studio head at Monolith, as we wondered aloud why nobody had ripped the Nemesis system off in the last three years. The impact of it seemed seismic back in 2014; almost every open world title released since felt like it could have benefited from it in one capacity or another, from *Batman: Arkham Knight* to *Mafia III* and even the likes of *Breath Of The Wild*.

While Stephens wouldn't be drawn on pondering the potential (and subsequent failings) of other IP, he did agree that the Nemesis system has brought a new dimension to the open world design model. "It changes the way you look at open world games. If you play games that don't have it, it feels like something is missing, like it is lacking in some way."

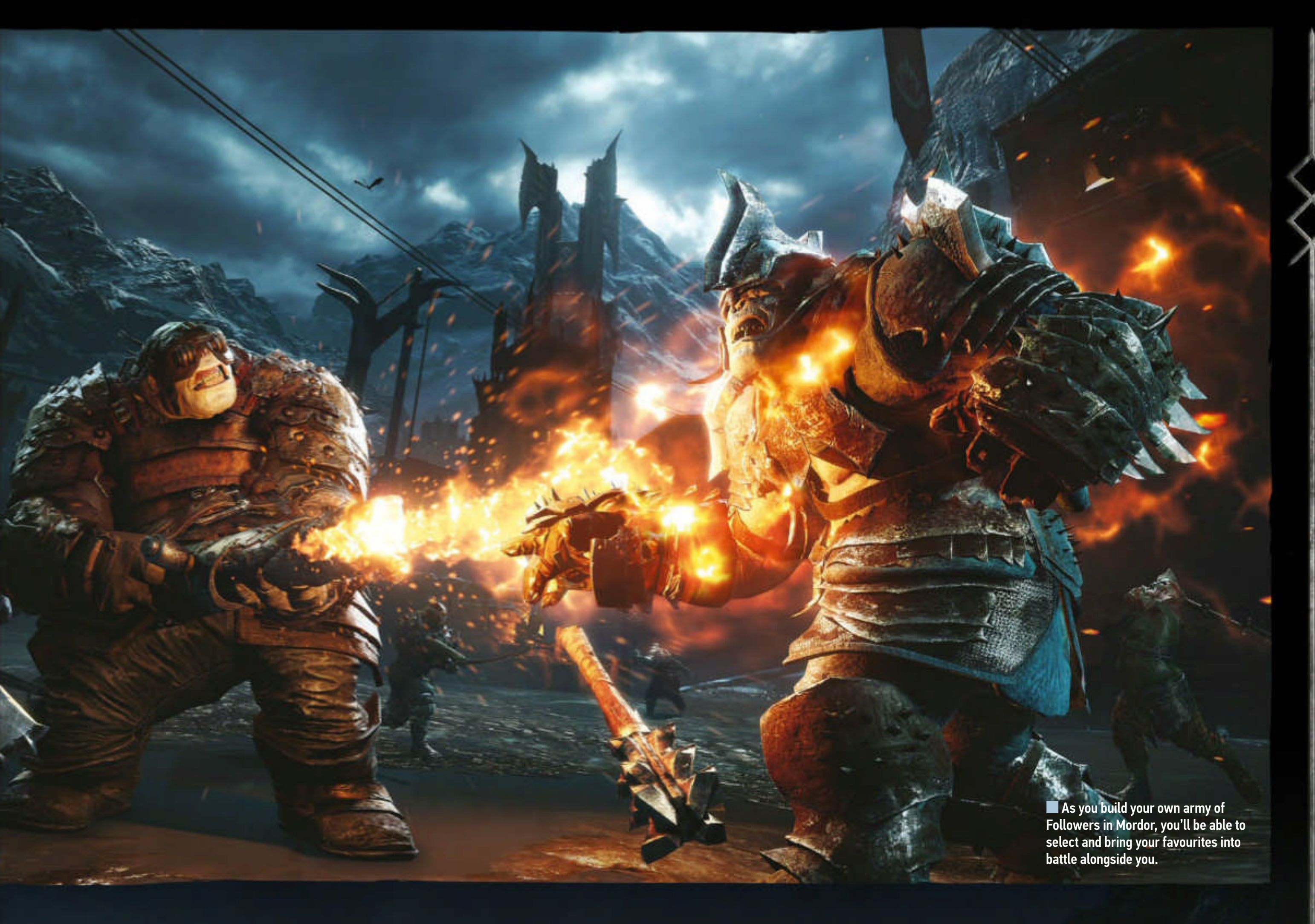
"I think right when we launched *Shadow Of Mordor*, being the studio head and being the business guy, I was nervous. I thought people would try to copy us," says Stephens, though it didn't take long for the studio to understand and appreciate just why this is the case, noting that a postmortem alleviated (most of) his fears. "I started to get more relaxed, because I realised it is hard [to copy]. There are a lot of things about our IP, and about the way the game is structured, that are required for the Nemesis system."

The structural implications, Stephens tells us, are far reaching, but can be as simple as "the fact that time always moves forward". While many games may operate with a 'dynamic' day and night cycle, this doesn't actually have any true impact on play; in *Middle-earth*, NPCs change, power shifts and the game world evolves. "A lot of games just aren't set up that way," he says, and he isn't wrong.

"There are so many systems that interact with each other… anybody that wants to follow up and kind of do what we did, well, they have to commit to it; they can't just tack it on to an established game," he says, adding. "It's a special thing. We are committed to it. We are going to keep on evolving the Nemesis system, hopefully forever; we see lots of directions it can continue to go in – we aren't done!"



The Orcs are now split into various factions, each offering different strengths and weaknesses to the presiding Overlord and region.



As you build your own army of Followers in Mordor, you'll be able to select and bring your favourites into battle alongside you.

"In *Shadow Of Mordor*, one of the features that really hooked players was the Nemesis system. It dynamically created unique and personal enemies for every player based on the fact that they remembered all of their interactions with you and grew over the course of the game," says Michael de Plater, Monolith's VP of creative, charged with bringing more unforgettable and unique storytelling opportunities to Mordor than have ever come before. "What we have tried to do this time is building on that idea by having even richer and more diverse stories with the NPCs that you encounter, only now we are extending that idea to the world itself."

Regardless of your thoughts on traditional open-world game design, *Shadow Of Mordor* – and, by extension, its sequel *Shadow Of War* – tells a story that could simply never exist in any other medium. That, in truth, is where the magic of the experience lives and breathes. Because, at its core, *Shadow Of Mordor* can still be lazily broken down to resemble *Arkham Knight* meets Tolkien – a sprinkling of *Assassin's Creed II* thrown in for good measure. You move through sparse maps filled with predetermined points of interest, fighting enemies in a fashion perfected by Rocksteady long ago. You scale the environment with agility, working diligently to sync with towers and take control of regions whose art assets were most likely in a colour palette grouping dubbed '50 shades of brown'. But sat behind that all too familiar design structure is the Nemesis system – arguably the first significant overhaul to open-world game design convention in a decade.

"EVERY ONE OF THESE REGIONS IS REALLY SIGNIFICANTLY LARGER THAN ANY OF THE AREAS THAT WE HAD IN SHADOW OF MORDOR."
MICHAEL DE PLATER

But what is it that makes it so important? It's easy to celebrate the Nemesis system without understanding the heart behind the mechanics of it all. So let's break it down: since the dawn of the last generation, as design proficiencies have improved and ambitions evolved, developers have worked hard to give you an illusion of choice. But even the most story driven games – the likes of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, and any game out of the Telltale factory – are still bound by traditional narrative structure and convention. It doesn't matter how complex a dialogue tree or branching path may seems on the surface, ultimately you are arriving in the same story state as another player. *Shadow Of Mordor* subverted this excellently, willing you to dismantle a syndicate of powerful, personalised Orcs as you fight towards the ultimate end goal of forging your very own ring of power – that's the moment *Shadow Of War* picks up.

The Nemesis system creates an unlimited array of personalised encounters, an army of anecdotal stories and a potentially endless supply of memorable enemies to fight that are all unique to you. Did you fail to kill a Captain but manage to scar them for life with burns? They will remember that, running in terror at the first sight of fire in the next encounter. Did a scrawny Orc beat your Ranger into submission in a rare moment of weakness? The next time you meet them on the field of battle they will have been promoted for their efforts, their proficiencies shifted to better counter any abilities you attempted to utilise before. As you begin to pick apart the Orc ranks, new randomly-generated NPCs will fill their place and arrive unannounced as you push for further supremacy over Mordor. Double agents can be embedded in armies, unforgettable rivalries will be forged with lowly Orcs and powerful Warchiefs and, ultimately, your attention becomes driven by a desire to resolve conflict in the most bloody and gruesome form imaginable. All of this has been wildly expanded upon in *Shadow Of War* and the results are striking. Tolkien would have been proud.

For Stephens, he likes to think of it as a system that brings the rivalries and unpredictability of multiplayer gaming to the single-player arena. "In single-player games, when facing off against AI, you never really have an experience where it feels personal; like there is a real person behind the AI. That was always the goal of the Nemesis system," he says, noting that the back and forth" play that emerges with the various Orcs isn't dissimilar to the rivalries that organically form in multiplayer deathmatch sessions, as too is the satisfaction that succeeding eventually brings. »

Once you overthrow a Fortress you'll be able to put one of your Followers in charge, with the visuals and speciality shifting accordingly.

It is the Orcs that you encounter, and how you chose to fight them, that became the real story of the game. And in *Shadow Of War* that will extend out into the people and politics that govern Middle-earth, one embroiled in a civil war on the eve of Sauron's return to the physical realm. The sequel offers up a series of detailed and diverse ecosystems to conquer; at the heart of each a large Fortress that not only signals control of the region, but the true ambition behind Monolith's renewed intentions here.

"Every single one of these regions is really significantly larger than any of the areas that we had in *Shadow Of Mordor* and much more detailed," says de Plater, recognising many of the complaints levied at the variety and diversity of the landscaping back in *Shadow Of Mordor*. "And every one of these regions is controlled by a Nemesis Fortress. Each one of those Fortresses is personalised depending on the characters that are actually ruling over it."

Shadow Of War doesn't just remember your decisions, it leans on them to create a believable, persistent world. The Fortresses expand the Nemesis system in a way we never knew we wanted, let alone could be achieved. *Shadow Of War* isn't just focused on fostering rivalries, but friendships and camaraderie too. Now you will be given the opportunity to build your own armies – of Orcs and powerful Olag-hai trolls, Warchiefs and dissenting trouble makers – in an effort to expand your power and influence across Mordor, wrangling control and territories from Sauron and his Nazgûl in the process.

"IN SINGLE-PLAYER GAMES, WHEN FACING OFF AGAINST AI, YOU NEVER REALLY HAVE AN EXPERIENCE WHERE IT FEELS PERSONAL."
KEVIN STEPHENS

It's all done in an effort to improve the scale and scope of the game, Stephen tells us, because by building an army of followers (each of which have met you in battle and been turned to your side thanks to the returning Domination ability), getting to know each of their personality traits, strengths and weaknesses before then leading them into large-scale sieges against an army of tailor made enemies was the inevitable next step for Monolith. "We wanted to have larger and bigger battles that satisfy the fantasy for anybody that loves Tolkien and has seen the movies. The other huge focus was personal stories; every design decision comes back to each individual player having their own personal stories that aren't exactly the same as anybody else."

That manifests itself first and foremost in the followers that you accrue: "You can pick and choose who your followers are and then relationships build [them] over time. Followers can betray you or they can save you," says Stephens, noting that this all depends on each character's personality and the way they are treated by you throughout the game. That said, being the best boss in Mordor doesn't always make for an easy life, you know how the popular saying goes; Orcs will be Orcs, after all. "You don't really know what they are going to do at times, because at the end of the day they are all Orcs. How loyal are they ever going to be to you? It's hard to know!"

What this means is that "no two players will have the same experience", Stephens teases. "The key thing that we focused on always was player stories; to ensure that players had more unique stories to tell and a deeper, richer experience." This all comes to a head in the Fortress Sieges. They set the stage for some visually impressive, player-driven war stories; effortlessly bringing about memories of the exhilarating Battle of Helm's Deep and the thunderous siege of Minas Tirith from the movie universe. Each Fortress comes with its own chain of command – an Overlord overseeing defences with four Warchiefs in tow, each defending a specific sector of the fortified castle, each needing to be conquered (or turned to your side) to help your army push forward in a tantalising real time fortress assault.

The battles themselves are immense. Not only massive in scope but full of many organic, procedural cinematic moments that get the blood pumping. It's widespread Orc-on-Orc violence; the scale is something akin to *Dynasty Warriors* meets the cinematography of Peter Jackson's *Lord Of The Rings*. As your army pushes on, Talion is able to scale the walls and take on enemies individually, cutting through assailants with an array of new combat techniques – empowered thanks to the power of the ring. Clearing the ranks gives you an opportunity to set traps to take down large groups of enemies or even the chance to utilise environmental objects to create new breach and flank points for your army.

Just as the rival Warchiefs can be dismembered and brutalised, so too can your friendly Warchiefs and long-standing allies; it's genuinely affecting too, not all that dissimilar to loosing a veteran soldier in *X-COM* or *Fire Emblem*. It's liberating to see a well placed double agent save you from certain death and frustratingly motivating to see an old companion show up as a renewed, Dark Lord-empowered, adversary. It's all incredibly impressive – both from a technical and gameplay perspective – even more so when you consider that all of this is procedural, the outcome undetermined until either you or the rival Overlord stands defeated.



Powerful Drakes can now be pulled under your rule, giving you scope to sweep over armies and toast 'em from above.





WHAT DOES MONOLITH MAKE OF PROJECT SCORPIO?

Shadow Of War becomes the first game confirmed for Microsoft's console for the hardcore

Middle-earth: Shadow Of War is the first game confirmed to launch on Microsoft's upcoming 'premium' Project Scorpio console – it will be one of the first games to release on the system later this year – and that presents something of a familiar challenge for Monolith. The studio is no stranger to working across generational divides and retooling its games for more powerful hardware after the fact. This is a process that studio head Kevin Stephens describes as "challenging" but ultimately rewarding.

"Monolith has always built its own technology, so we are used to it. Back in the day, when the focus was on PC, it was always, 'Well, what PC are you focused on?' I think it is in our DNA to build concurrently across platforms," he says, confident that the release of 2014's *Shadow Of Mordor* across Xbox 360, PS3, Xbox One and PS4 proves that the studio is more than capable – not to mention the wonderful 4K upgrade the game later received for PS4 Pro in 2016.

But what about Project Scorpio, the mysterious Xbox One upgrade due for release at the end of 2017? Stephens wouldn't be drawn on details, but he did indicate that Microsoft is still being cautious with firm details – even to a studio deep into development and quickly approaching the finish line. "We are really excited about Project Scorpio. What Microsoft is saying seems true to us, that it will be the fastest console ever created when it releases. What developer is not excited about having their game on (in the moment) the fastest console?"

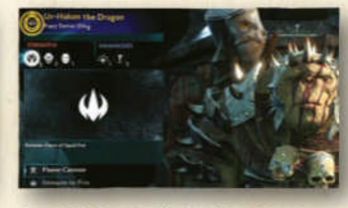
RHYTHM OF A FORTRESS ASSAULT

This is how Shadow Of War's biggest battles play out



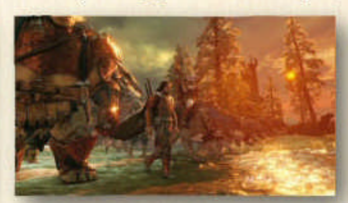
SELECT A FORTRESS

1 Each of the different regions in *Shadow Of War* features its own Fortress, dictating the swing of power in Mordor. It's up to you to gain the necessary power, followers and advantages in the sandbox areas before you march on the stronghold and begin your assault. In this instance we're going to take a look at an assault on the Terror Fortress of Seregost.



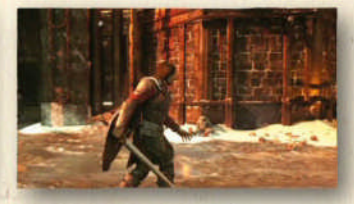
ASSESS THE OVERLORD

2 Fortresses are typically maintained by four Warchiefs – many of whom you will have already encountered out on your adventures – and is ruled over by a powerful Overlord. This is your opportunity to assess their strengths and weaknesses. Ur-Hakon The Dragon is immune to fire, so it's worth leaving your flaming arrows back in Minas Ithil.



LAUNCH THE ASSAULT

3 Once you've got a beat on the enemy Fortress and its leading powers it's time to select your strongest Followers – Warchiefs that have defected from Sauron's army – and prepare to launch your assault. It's a cinematic moment, echoing the calm-before-the-storm moments the Peter Jackson movies fostered so excellently.



BREACH THE GATE

4 As your comrades charge forward in a vicious rush of blood and fury, pushing through the initial bevy of Fortress defences, it's now up to you to find a way over the gate. You can knock on the front door, blow a hole in the walls using environmental traps or, ideally, use parkour to scale it – this will give you an opportunity sneak behind enemy lines.



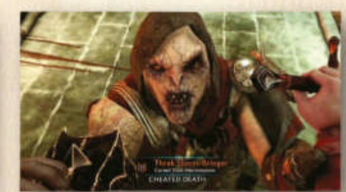
USE YOUR ALLIES

6 Your friendly Warchiefs are able to turn the tide of large scale fights, but they are also expendable. It's up to you to watch their back and ensure their survival, with encounters being determined in real-time. You can also use any double agents you've planted in the Fortress to help turn the tide in your favour.



TURN WARCHIEFS

7 Even in the heat of battle, enemy Warchiefs can be turned to the Bright side. You should be on the look out for any opportunities to cast Dominion and gain new allies; looking for the option to shame enemies (reducing their level for a fight another day), fight them to the death or recruit them into your own army.



PREPARE FOR ANYTHING

8 Just because you've killed an enemy dead doesn't mean they are out of the game entirely. Like in *Shadow Of Mordor,* Warchiefs can return from the dead imbued with the power of the Dark Lord. These surprise encounters can throw your plan out of the window, so be sure to keep an eye out for surprises at all times.



FACE THE OVERLORD

9 Once you've battled through the Warchiefs and helped your army push up to the inner sanctum of the Fortress, it'll be time to face the Overlord in a fight to the death. It'll be a difficult battle but, if you're lucky, a friendly Warchief will appear and save you from certain death.

Shadow Of War is visually impressive, with Monolith making full use of the power offered by Project Scorpio and the PS4 Pro.



EXECUTE WARCHIEFS

5 As you begin moving through areas of the Fortress you'll need to begin taking on enemy Warchiefs. You'll recognise many of these foes – they will bring past grudges and indiscretions to the fight from previous encounters, and it's only by beating these powerful enemies that your army will be able to push forward.



TAKE CONTROL

10 Once you've defeated the Overlord you'll take control of the Fortress, being given the opportunity to promote one of your own Warchiefs, not only giving you rule over the region but affecting what materials your war machine will gain – each Fortress is fully customised by the type of Overlord sitting on the throne.







What will continue to keep the fortresses and accompanying sandbox areas fresh is the personalised flavour that comes with each Overlord in charge of events. Each Fortress reflects the specialities of the Overlord at the top and this is not only reflected in the design and defences of the castle itself, but will also resonate out into each region's sandbox. "The Orcs now belong to different tribes that reflect all sorts of different elements of the game and the environment," reveals de Plater. "For example, the Beastmaster is a part of the Feral Tribe. They are specialists in hunting, catching, killing and taming monsters and beasts to use as a part of their war machine. If we go down into the sandbox and out into the open world here, we would be encountering hunting parties and different creatures and the fort would also represent that," he says, also giving us a taste of what to expect from Overlords who specialise in fire weapons and the impact that will have on Fortress assaults. "If he is a specialist [in fire], we are going to be facing things like flaming arrows, flaming catapults, boiling oil and fire traps. The interactions between the Nemesis system and the forts means no two fort assaults are going to be the same."

This customisation also extends to the allied Nemesis system too. After successfully ousting an Overlord you are able to install one of your own Warchiefs into position, promoting them and allowing their tribal alliances to spread through the Fortress and out into the region, helping Talion's own war effort. If this sounds familiar, it's because last year's *Mafia III* attempted (and largely failed) to implement a similar system – albeit on the streets of New Orleans rather than the war-scorched fields of Mordor. Without the Nemesis system behind it, *Mafia III*'s push and pull between associates felt hollow and ultimately ineffective; in *Shadow Of War* it's empowering and exciting, to see a game react so dutifully to your presence, victories and mistakes.

What continues to surprise us is how much work Monolith is putting into answering the criticism levied at *Shadow Of Mordor*. It would, quite honestly, have been enough for the studio to come out with this upgraded Nemesis system in an effort to distract from its other untended areas, but Monolith has clearly been eager to use up every second of its two and a half year development cycle.

"The experience and [subsequent] success of making *Shadow Of Mordor*, our first third-person open world action game, really gave us a chance to be more ambitious with the sequel," continues de Plater. "It has allowed us to do something that is as epic as what we imagine and dream of when we approach *Lord Of The Rings* and Middle-earth. And that goal of creating this truly epic game applies to the ambition of the story [and] Nemesis system, but it also applies to every other aspect of the game."

While *Shadow Of Mordor* contained just two regions, the sequel is made up of many. We've seen five so far, including Cirith Ungol, the Gondorian city of Minas Ithil (known more commonly as Minas Morgul), the mountain valley Seregost (up behind Barad-dûr), Gorgoroth on the slopes of Mount Doom and another in the Sea of Núrnen. "Every single one of these regions is really significantly larger than the two areas that we had in *Shadow Of Mordor* and much more detailed," says de Plater of the regions, each of which contains a Fortress to be conquered – instanced away from the emergent chaos, story objectives and collectibles found in the accompanying sandboxes.

When we first sat down with Stephens, he began by telling us that Monolith's goal was to just do "more of everything". That can too often sound like hype from a studio trying to engineer a little excitement, but once you see the game in action any fears will quickly fall away. *Shadow Of War* is an impressive concept backed up with precision execution. "We wanted to improve the story, we definitely wanted to improve the Nemesis system, we wanted to make a bigger world and a more epic world," Stephens continues and, we can confirm, Monolith has eagerly followed through on its ambitions. The Nemesis system is impressive; the combat has seen subtle improvements and the RPG customisation systems have been greatly improved. *Shadow Of War* has the potential to make *Shadow Of Mordor* look like a gorgeous, glorified tech demo – a proof of concept before the real fun and ingenuity begins.

"We have put a lot energy into making a really compelling, satisfying game," says Stephens. "We want a very robust and full experience for everybody; for the person that loves to explore, they will love the game; for the person that loves story, they will love the game; for the person that loves the Nemesis system, they will love the game; we don't want to leave anybody out, we want this to be a game that everybody loves."

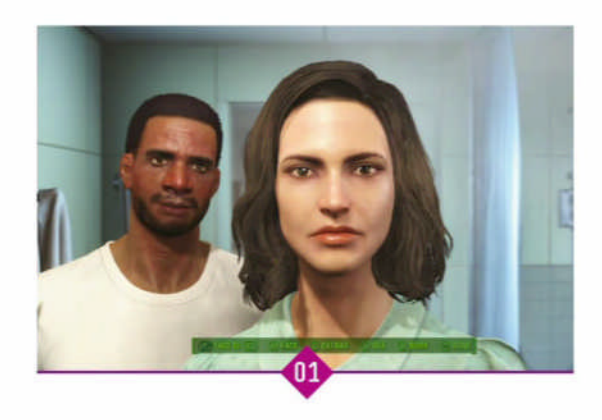
Given what we've seen of *Shadow Of War* so far, Monolith is certainly on the right path. With the game set to launch on PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One on 25 August – not to mention alongside Project Scorpio when it launches 'Holiday 2017' – you won't have long to wait to get this game in your hands; to begin building your own destiny in the realm of Middle-earth, battling to leave an impression on the scorched lands of Mordor. If you've ever dreamed of stepping into Tolkien's world, *Middle-earth: Shadow Of War* is your best opportunity to do so yet.

30

HOT NEW VR GAMES TO WATCH



HAVE YOU PURCHASED A VIRTUAL REALITY HEADSET AND ARE STRUGGLING TO FIND ANYTHING TO PLAY, OR ARE YOU PERHAPS ON THE FENCE, TRYING TO JUSTIFY SIPHONING SO MUCH MONEY OUT OF YOUR BANK ACCOUNT? THE SECOND WAVE OF VR GAMES IS COMING AND **GAMES™** HAS PICKED 30 OF THE MOST EXCITING, INNOVATIVE AND STRIKING FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION



01

FALLOUT 4 VR

VR: HTC VIVE • **DEV:** IN-HOUSE • **DATE:** Q4 2017

Bethesda rode a wave of hype right out of E3 2016 with the announcement of *Fallout 4 VR*, although the company quickly went quiet – and some started to believe the worst. Thankfully, that worry was entirely unwarranted. When it launches later in 2017 for HTC Vive, you will be receiving the full, uncompromised *Fallout 4* experience. Bethesda is putting all of its weight behind this project, promising a unique experience that'll change your perspective on both *Fallout 4* and the potential of virtual reality. If last year's hands-on impressions are anything to go by, it might indeed be time to invest in a Vive.





It may have been divisive upon release, but VR can only benefit the *Fallout 4* experience.

02

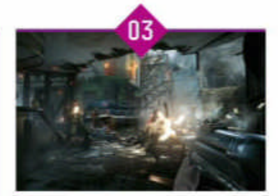


FARPOINT

VR: PSVR
DEV: SIEA/IMPULSE GEAR
DATE: Q3 2017

This is without question the biggest reason to invest in a PlayStation VR headset in 2017. As one of the first games to make use of the upcoming Aim Controller, it already feels like the FPS game you've always dreamed of experiencing. You'll take to a hostile world, one loaded with waves of monstrous spiders, and blast away with a precision and momentum a traditional controller configuration simply cannot deliver. The best point of reference we could possibly offer is this: *Farpoint* is the unlicensed *Starship Troopers* game you never knew you wanted, and it has the potential to kickstart a new wave of shooters in PSVR.

03



BLUNT FORCE

VR: OCULUS RIFT, HTC VIVE
DEV: G2A GAMES
DATE: Q4 2017

G2A is more than likely best known for its key code reselling business, which is a subject of much debate in the industry. It has also made an impression in VR. The bold shift in focus for the company is bringing us *Blunt Force*, an ambitious game that will run across two simultaneous storylines; the first, a smaller exploration experience where the player must find hidden clues and information, while the second dives head-on into focused WWII shootouts. It's an odd blend, but what we've seen of the static shooter – letting you teleport to fresh locations once the bodies hit the floor – has been impressive, polished and worth keeping both eyes on.

04



STAR TREK: BRIDGE CREW

VR: OCULUS RIFT, HTC VIVE, PSVR
DEV: RED STORM ENTERTAINMENT
DATE: 30 MAY 2017

In many ways, this could be the ultimate *Star Trek* experience. No, you know what, scratch that last transmission, *Bridge Crew is* the ultimate *Star Trek* experience. Any Trekkie worth their yellow shirt has always dreamt of taking control of a bridge while under duress and now you'll finally be able to do it. The USS Aegis is home to you and up to three of your friends, taking on the role of either captain, tactical officer, engineer or helm officer as you work together to navigate (and survive) Klingon-controlled space. It's mad, loud and it will undoubtedly be the party game of the year – if you can get through it without tearing each other apart.

05



STATIK

VR: PSVR
DEV: TARSIER STUDIOS
DATE: 24 APRIL 2017

One of the biggest problems facing VR development and gaming is the fact that the player is unable to see their hands, making use of a controller to be quite cumbersome. Perhaps that's what makes *Statik* so appealing, in that it turns this relative weakness into its biggest strength. It's a puzzle game that sees your hands locked inside of a strange contraption, and it's only through cautious exploration of the DualShock's movements, buttons, sticks and triggers that you'll be able to figure out the correct combination to each side in an effort to free yourself. It's a testing experience, but it's one that would only ever work in VR.

06



ACE COMBAT 7: SKIES UNKNOWN

VR: PSVR
DEV: PROJECT ACES
DATE: Q3 2017

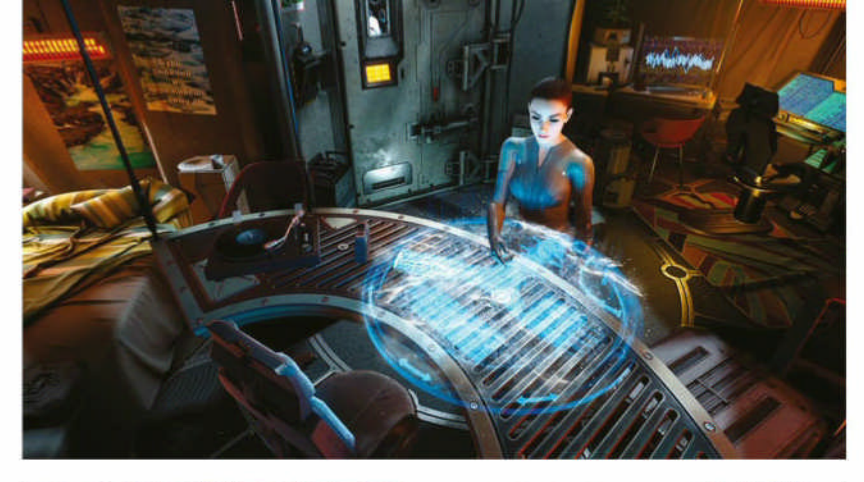
Ace Combat 7 is, in a word, stunning. Developer Project Aces has always done a stellar job of delivering high-octane thrills with the long-running series but it feels as if it is about to ascend to another level as it meets with PSVR. It's these kinds of experiences virtual reality was built for; it lets you climb into the cockpit of a monstrously powerful jet and take to the skies, using a look-to-lock missile system – not dissimilar to the one found in *EVE: Valkyrie* – to take down enemies at breakneck speeds. This is another triple-A quality game for PSVR, helping the headset to emerge as the leading arena for dependable VR gaming.

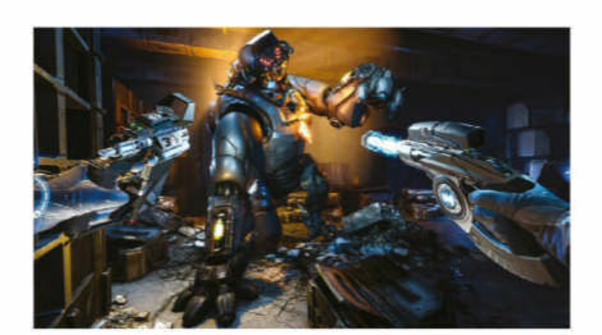


ARKTIKA.1

VR: OCULUS RIFT • **DEV:** 4A GAMES • **DATE:** Q3 2017

If 4A Games should be known for anything, it's that it sure knows how to deliver one hell of a post-apocalyptic vision of the future; the developer behind *Metro 2033* and *Metro: Last Ligh*t is back with *Arktika.1* and it looks to be no exception. Built exclusively for Oculus Touch – running on the latest, impressive build of the studio's in-house 4A engine – *Arktika.1* is an immersive and high-octane FPS game making full use of the new technology. Expect intuitive weapon handling – that is truly only as accurate as your aim – and an array of gorgeous-looking environments to litter with bullet holes.







08

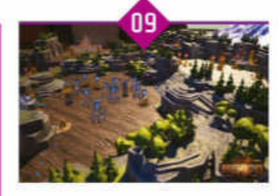


SKYWORLD

VR: OCULUS RIFT, HTC VIVE
DEV: VERTIGO GAMES
DATE: TBC 2017

On the surface, it might be difficult to see the appeal of this turn-based strategy game. But there's this moment where *Skyworld* immediately spins into focus, literally; there you are, staring at a blank tabletop before it flips, bringing a beautiful and fully animated cityscape into view. From there, it is yours to tinker with; to explore and renovate. You can lean into it for a closer look at your tiny kingdom, picking apart the fabric of it all, or you can take a (quite literal) step back for a better overview of your kingdom. Vertigo Games has had this in development for a number of years, and it's great to finally see it edge closer to reality.

09

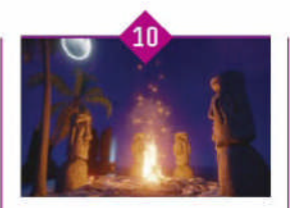


BRASS TACTICS

VR: OCULUS RIFT
DEV: HIDDEN PATH ENTERTAINMENT
DATE: OCTOBER 2017

Brass Tactics might just be VR's first legitimate real-time strategy game, coming from the studio responsible for *Defense Grid: The Awakening* and *Age Of Empires II HD*. *Brass Tactics* uses Oculus Touch controllers to give you full control and command of your miniature army, using intuitive motion gestures to let you swing around the tabletop to get a better view of the chaos unfolding beneath you.

10



XING: THE LAND BEYOND

VR: OCULUS RIFT, HTC VIVE, PSVR
DEV: WHITE LOTUS INTERACTIVE
DATE: TBC 2017

Poetic adventure game *XING: The Land Beyond* has finally been confirmed for VR and we couldn't be happier. White Lotus' latest invites you into a gorgeous, sprawling world littered with perplexing puzzles to solve – the perfect remedy to a long day in the office. Virtual reality doesn't have to induce fits of fear; sometimes it can be the perfect place to chill.

11



PIXEL RIPPED 1989

VR: OCULUS RIFT, PSVR
DEV: PIXEL RIPPED INC.
DATE: Q4 2017

Pixel Ripped is a pretty mad journey through the history of gaming, leaning on nostalgia and intuitive design to create a game within a game as venture across the ages to assist self-described gaming addict Nicola to complete her favourite platformer, *Pixel Ripped*. It makes inventive use of the VR space; at its most basic it's a 2D game in a 3D world, but at its heart it is unlike anything else, keep this on your radar.

12



GRANBLUE FANTASY

VR: PSVR
DEV: PLATINUMGAMES/CYGAMES
DATE: TBC 2018

PlatinumGames and CyGames' RPG *GranBlue Fantasy: Project Re:Link* is making the leap to PSVR in 2018 following its hugely successful debut on mobile in 2014 – boasting over ten million downloads in Japan. JRPGs are something of a rarity in VR and we've already got high hopes for the console conversion; anything out of PlatinumGames is always worth keeping a close eye on, after all.

PSVR AIM CONTROLLER

With motion and tracking sensors built into the frame of this futuristic assault rifle, the PSVR Aim gives you full control over weapon movement, allowing for a truly authentic, precise and intuitive, firing experience – you can even pull it up to your eyes to activate the scope. Sony, we need a new ***Time Crisis*** game immediately.





GNOG

VR: PSVR
DEV: KO-OP MODE
DATE: 2 MAY 2017

GNOG is one of those delightful puzzle games that you really need to see in action to truly appreciate. Supported by Double Fine Productions and developed by KO-OP Mode, *GNOG* has sprung to life in the 3D environment afforded by PSVR. It's a bizarre puzzle game with a surreal graphical style, willing you to flip, twist and turn an array of weird and wonderful heads before revealing the diorama that hides inside – each a puzzle to be solved in its own right. It's beautifully strange, and a sight to behold when put in a position to overwhelm your senses. Expect to be truly tested when it launches summer 2017.



FROM OTHER SUNS

VR: OCULUS RIFT
DEV: GUNFIRE GAMES
DATE: Q4 2017

Gunfire Games, the studio behind one of 2016's best VR games, *Chronos*, returns with *From Other Suns* and it's one of the most ambitious games we've seen on the Oculus Rift so far. It's essentially a killer blend of *FTL* and *Borderlands*, blending the punishing space-sector touring and ship management of the former with hectic first-person combat of the latter. Plus, it supports three-player co-op.





THE PERSISTENCE

VR: PSVR
DEV: FIRESPRITE
DATE: TBC 2017

The Persistence pits you in a perilous situation, awakening from cryosleep to find your ship's crew has mutated into various monstrosities. From there it's all about violence, survival and harvesting stem cells. Navigating the damaged ship is always a new challenge, as it procedurally generates every time that you die – and you will die, a lot – but it's integral to locating new enemies; each one that you encounter can be harvested for stem cells that enhance your character after death. Calling all fans of the *System Shock 2* aesthetic and the rogue-like frustration paradox, you'll want to check out the horrors of *The Persistence*.



RICK AND MORTY: VIRTUAL RICK-ALITY

VR: HTC VIVE
DEV: OWLCHEMY LABS
DATE: TBC

Who else would you trust to bring an exact replica of Morty's lab to your living room? Owlchemy Labs, of course – the developer behind the excellent *Job Simulator*. Engage with the chaos, leap through portals to strange new alien worlds and, finally, experience one of TV's most radical adventures for yourself; room scale was built for this kind of carnage.

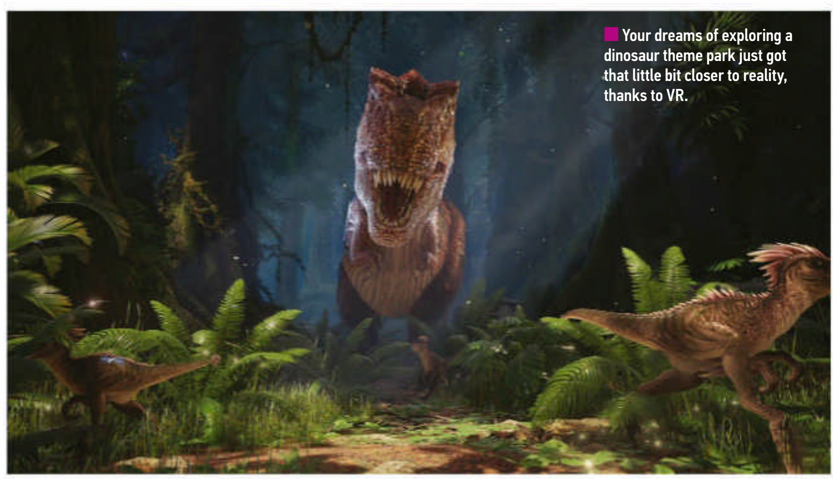




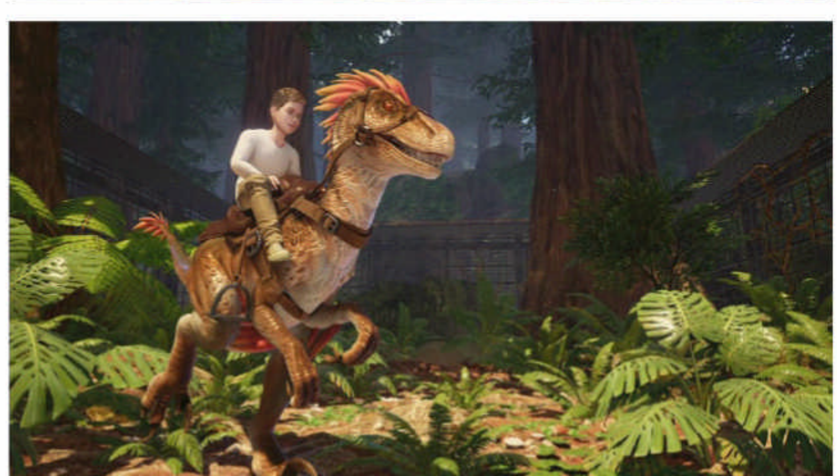
LONE ECHO

VR: OCULUS RIFT
DEV: READY AT DAWN
DATE: TBC

Lone Echo is one of the defining experiences of the second wave of VR games coming in 2017. It's proof that fantastic and unique experiences can be created once developers design VR around its inherent limitations, as opposed to deliriously trying to fit established 2D design templates into the new 3D moulds. *Lone Echo* has you drifting through zero gravity, attempting to run and maintain a space station locked into orbit around Saturn. It has fixed VR's biggest issue, locomotion; by removing the need to walk, Ready At Dawn has unlocked the limitations of physical space, giving you an intuitive and immersive playground to tinker in.



Your dreams of exploring a dinosaur theme park just got that little bit closer to reality, thanks to VR.



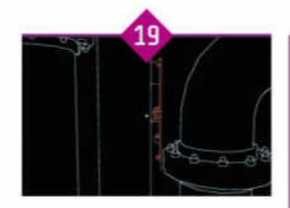


ARK PARK

VR: OCULUS RIFT, HTC VIVE, PSVR ▪ **DEV:** SNAIL GAMES ▪ **DATE:** Q3 2017

The *Jurassic Park* experience is coming to PlayStation 4. The opportunity to visit a land before time, inhabited by all manner of strange beasts and creatures is something Spielberg fans have been waiting over two decades to see with their own two eyes. Now, thanks to PSVR, it'll be happening. *ARK Park* is a companion piece to *ARK: Survival Evolved*, sacrificing survival in favour of something far more beneficial – education. *ARK Park* will let you explore the gorgeous world of *ARK* at your leisure (on foot or by vehicle), giving you the opportunity to interact with, and learn a little, about its mighty dinosaur inhabitants.

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STIFLED

VR: OCULUS RIFT, HTC VIVE, PSVR
DEV: GATTAI GAMES
DATE: Q2 2017

This is one of those unique experiences that truly benefits from virtual reality. *Stifled* is a minimalistic horror game with a striking presentation, thrusting you into blackened areas illuminated by sound. The more noise your microphone picks up, the more the world is exposed, though that comes with its own dangers; sound may reveal your surroundings, but it also attracts nightmares that lurk in the shadows. By robbing you of one of your senses, *Stifled* quickly makes you feel vulnerable, forcing you to balance a fear of the dark with the relative safety it offers. A brilliantly simple idea brought to life through excellent execution.

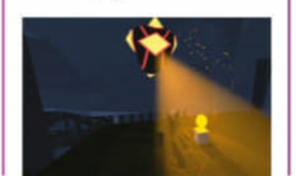
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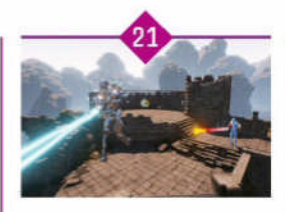
PANOPTIC

VR: HTC VIVE
DEV: TEAM PANOPTES
DATE: TBC 2017

Panoptic is the kind of asymmetrical multiplayer experience we were really hoping to see a lot more of in VR. The player wearing the headset is the Overseer while a local PC player on the same machine controls a rebel and must avoid the burning gaze of their opponent. It takes the best functionality of VR and melds it with something that can be shared, breaking the Vive out of its often lonely bubble. We're very excited to play this one.



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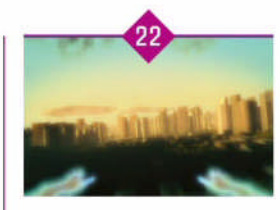


GUARDIAN ARENA

VR: OCULUS RIFT, HTC VIVE
DEV: PURPLE SQUID GAMES
DATE: Q2 2017

Guardian Arena brings a fresh perspective to a classic setup, literally. This online multiplayer shooter looks to subvert established arena model design conventions to better suit the VR environment. *Guardian Arena* plays from a third-person perspective, letting you scale the entire arena up or down to get a wider view of the action or a closer look at the carnage. It's designed to channel the blistering momentum of *Quake*, while ensuring players aren't beside themselves with motion sickness. It's an interesting strategy/shooter hybrid that's at least trying to bring legacy experiences to the new platform.

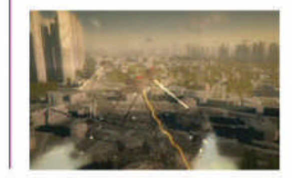
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MEGATON RAINFALL

VR: PSVR
DEV: PENTADIMENSIONAL GAMES
DATE: Q4 2017

Ever wondered what it would be like to actually *be* Superman? *Megaton Rainfall* casts you as an interdimensional superbeing fighting off a worldwide alien invasion – oh, and you have the power to level cities with the flick of a wrist and can accelerate from zero to Mach 10 in five seconds. It's a little mad and wildly impressive, effortlessly empowering you in a way that we haven't experienced before.



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WILSON'S HEART

VR: OCULUS RIFT
DEV: TWISTED PIXEL GAMES
DATE: 25 APRIL 2017

Full-length narrative-driven experiences are hard to come by in virtual reality, but that's what Twisted Pixel is hoping to deliver with *Wilson's Heart*. A psychological thriller that takes the themes of *Shutter Island* and *Twilight Zone* and crams them into a creepy abandoned hospital (because where else); *Wilson's Heart* is a point-and-click adventure that has you trying to figure out what horrible experiments you've been subjected to in the past. It makes fantastic use of VR to unnerve you every step of the way, while the addition of *Robocop*'s Peter Weller on voiceover duties only serves to pull up production values.

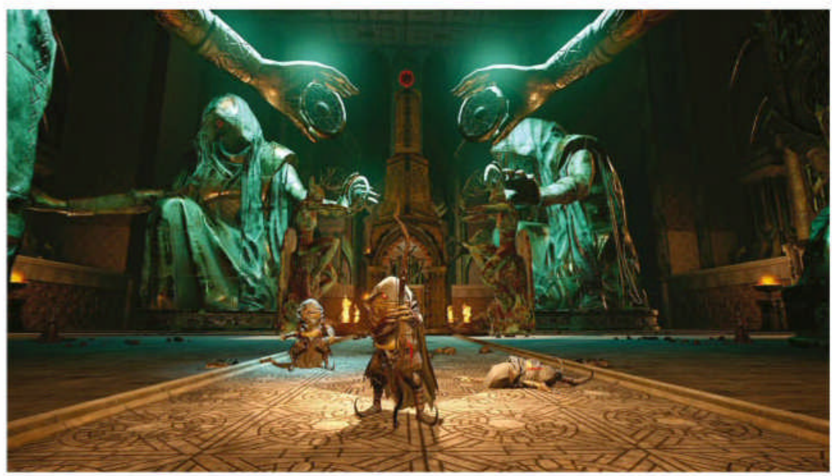


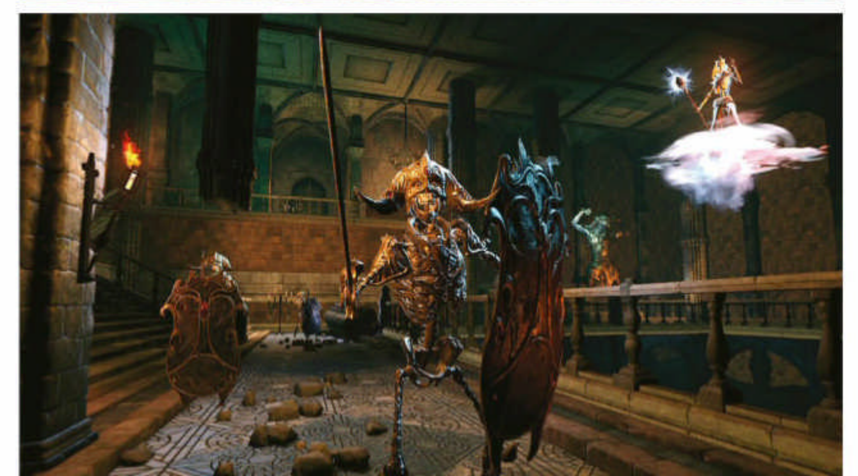
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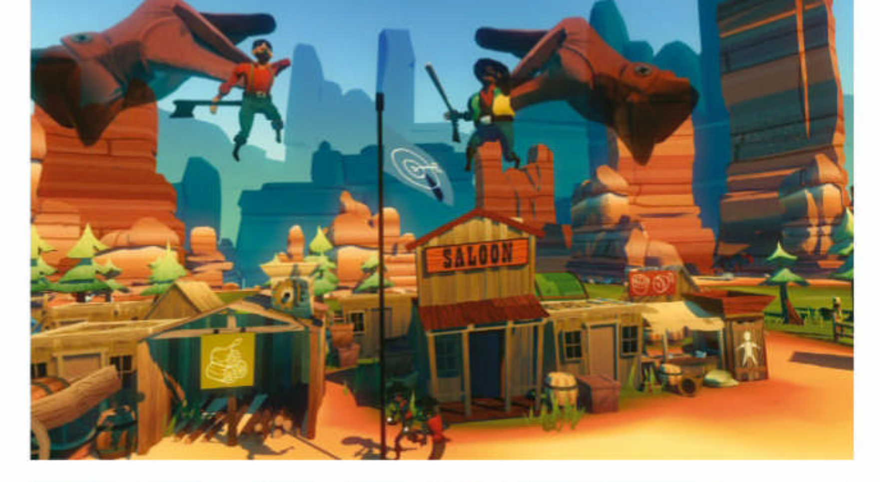
THE MAGE'S TALE

VR: OCULUS RIFT • **DEV:** INXILE ENTERTAINMENT • **DATE:** TBC

We wouldn't expect inXile's first steps into virtual reality to be anything less than spectacular, and we're yet to be disappointed by what we've seen of *The Mage's Tale*. The studio is bringing the world of *The Bard's Tale IV* exclusively to Oculus Rift with Touch in 2017 in this beautiful, hand-crafted first-person dungeon crawler. *The Mage's Tale* is really pushing what we thought was possible in VR, and it's impossible to overstate just how satisfying it'll be to conjure and throw an array of elemental abilities with intricate hand motions and the flick of the wrist.









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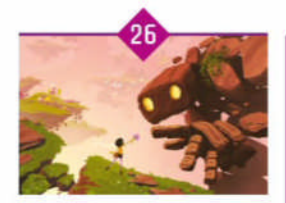


DINO FRONTIER

VR: PSVR • **DEV:** UBER ENTERTAINMENT • **DATE:** Q3 2017

Following the launch of *Wayward Sky*, we've been eagerly keeping a watchful eye over Uber Entertainment, and the studio isn't disappointing with its follow-up, *Dino Frontier*. Pitched as a light simulation game, *Dino Frontier* has you building and managing a frontier settlement in a world where the Wild West and dinosaur-populated eras collide. As Big Mayor you'll be responsible for overlooking the settlement in tabletop-scale VR, ensuring your semi-autonomous citizens not only thrive and survive, but also avoid being eaten by the wandering packs of wild dinosaurs that patrol the area. It has a gorgeous look and plenty of fun systems; *Dino Frontier* is a PSVR must.

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LOLA AND THE GIANT

VR: GOOGLE DAYDREAM
DEV: CLIMAX STUDIOS
DATE: Q2 2017

Lola And The Giant might just be the first truly must-play game for Daydream View, Google's first virtual reality headset for Pixel. Inspired by parenthood and executed with grace, *Lola And The Giant* is an adventure game that casts you as both the titular Lola, a little girl with a mysterious power, and her accompanying Giant, who must work together to escape the wondrous, picturesque world they've become lost within. You'll be switching between third- and first-person perspectives to solve an array of environmental puzzles, exploring beautiful locales and losing yourself in what might be *the* VR fairytale of the year.

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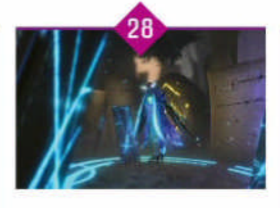


AUGMENTED EMPIRE

VR: GEAR VR
DEV: COATSINK
DATE: Q3 2017

Designed specifically for Samsung Gear VR, *Augmented Empire* is further proof that virtual reality on mobile is as viable as its more expensive console brethren. Coatsink's upcoming story-driven RPG is promising the real-deal here, a fully-fledged RPG to lose yourself to, complete with a wide cast of characters to befriend and a complex politically-driven narrative to enjoy.

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UNKNOWN FATE

VR: OCULUS RIFT, HTC VIVE
DEV: MARSLIT GAMES
DATE: Q3 2017

Exploring strange worlds is one of the biggest draws of virtual reality, making us hugely excited about diving into Marslit Games' third-person adventure title, *Unknown Fate*. Promising a twisted story through a surreal, ethereal world, mind-bending puzzles and mysteries to uncover, *Unknown Fate* is yet another game that's making the leap into VR seem easier than ever.

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PRIVATE EYE

VR: OCULUS RIFT, HTC VIVE, PSVR
DEV: SLACKER GAMES
DATE: TBC

The point-and-click adventure genre is yet to make a splash on VR, but that's what Slacker Games is hoping to change with its psychological thriller *Private Eye*. A murder mystery that sees you confined to a wheelchair, armed only with a pair of binoculars against your house's rear window, its one of the most compelling and original games we've seen so far on Rift.

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TIME CARNAGE

VR: OCULUS RIFT, HTC VIVE
DEV: WALES INTERACTIVE
DATE: 15 MAY 2017

Some survival shooters like to pit you against zombies. Some enjoy pitting you against hulking monsters. Others still enjoy throwing dinosaurs at you (a popular choice in VR as you've likely noticed). However *Time Carnage* isn't greatly interested in making a choice between such challenging enemies. It's going to throw the lot at you. This is a dark, gorgeous and crazy shooter.

OCULUS TOUCH

The Touch controllers – now coming in at a reduced price and with improved availability, down from £190 to £100 – open the Oculus Rift up to precise and natural motion control. Compact and comfortable, this tech ensures that hand-gesture movement is as intuitive and natural as using your real hands. Should you opt in for additional sensors (£60) this will even let you enjoy room-scale tracking, something that was previously an HTC Vive-exclusive feature.

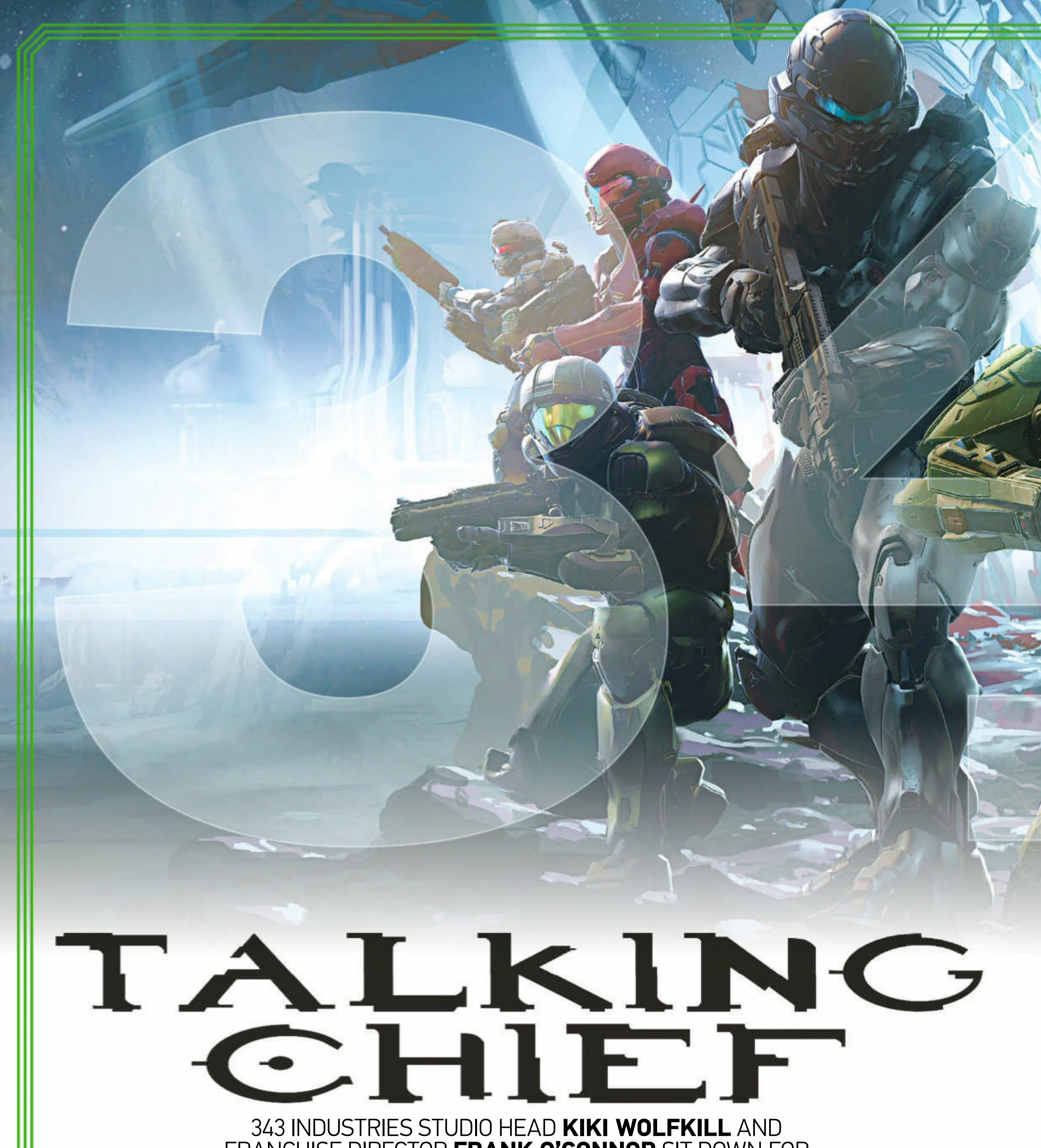




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TALKING CHIEF

343 INDUSTRIES STUDIO HEAD **KIKI WOLFKILL** AND FRANCHISE DIRECTOR **FRANK O'CONNOR** SIT DOWN FOR A CANDID DISCUSSION OF THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF THE HALO FRANCHISE



It's interesting to be able to catch up with you between major game releases. What do you get up to in gaps like this where you're not directly promoting a new title?

Frank: It kind of depends on the release. We both obviously have really different responsibilities, but typically you're just working either on sustaining marketing for this one or the actual production of the next one.

Kiki: I think we have the big 'tent pole' projects and then we also have a lot of smaller things going on both in terms of internal studio infrastructure and also a lot of our ancillary storytelling programs. Frank, for instance, has a whole franchise team, which works across the studio in terms of shepherding the universe and canon across all of the things that we're doing. So they're pretty much busy every single day of the year.

Frank: But it's nice to get months and months at a stretch and this is going to be a slightly unusual year. We're going to be interrupted by multiple future-facing projects, but this year we get to go pretty deep on our mainline items without being distracted for at least a few months. E3 is always a distraction, but this holiday we don't have a huge triple-A individual game coming out, so this year can be a good year to get our heads down on the next big things. »

Kiki: There are always things that we are incubating and exploring and concepting internally. That's always an ongoing process for us.

And you're coming up on the tenth anniversary of 343 this year too?
Frank: Well, I guess we didn't know and you've reminded us and if you could tell me when my wedding anniversary is, I actually forgot [laughs]. I know the date, but I don't know which year it is. I hadn't even considered that. Maybe that means I've been here longer than I was at Bungie, which was a really long time as well.
Kiki: It's funny because we had a sort of rolling start so it's hard to pinpoint the exact day.
Frank: A combination of people here were a melange of Bungie and Microsoft at 343 as a continuative entity. I'm with Kiki; I don't necessarily think of a specific start point. You've given us a project for this afternoon.
Kiki: We will forensically try to figure it out.
Frank: And we will pretend that we knew all along.

What do you think has been the greatest lesson that you've learnt as a studio?
Frank: I have learned multiple lessons, but I don't think there's a single one that beats the combination effect of all of those lessons. I think that the most important thing for me, spread across multiple learning, is about building teams and having those teams function together properly. There are lots of things that we've learned about the game. Lots of things that we've learned about the universe, but those tend to be little incremental things. For me, it's about building a studio and building a team that is focused on the same goals.
Kiki: I think, as a studio, a lesson for us has been to never stop learning. I think it's a combination of the environment and the landscape changes so quickly and there are so many different inputs in the entertainment world. And equally we always need to be looking forward and organically thinking about our plans relative to how the environment is changing around us. And also we started as a studio building a game together for the first time as a group of people and I think there are different phases of learning. The first was how do we work together, how to be a team and make a game together. Then it's, 'How do we find our voice?' I think that's something that's been a very organic process over the last …
Frank: Ten years? [Laughs].
Kiki: Ten years [laughs]. There's no world where you can sit back and say, 'We know how to do this and we're just going to march forward'. It's a constantly evolving and learning environment and I think that's been the biggest lesson, to be comfortable with the fact that not only should we be learning, but we will and that means successes and failures in moving forward from all of those things quickly onto the next.

Looking back on these ten years, do you consider there to be a particular high point for the studio so far?
Frank: Getting games out is always the biggest high point. I think that, as with any release, we tend to concentrate on keeping things going and fixing issues. We tend not to sit back and bask. There's no time for it. Any triple-A game nowadays doesn't really have a final ship date. There's always sustained content and support that has to happen after that. I've got lots of high points; the music on *Halo 4*, the campaign *Halo 4*, the multiplayer in *Halo 5*. There are other stories that we've told, and we're going to get into this in our conversation, but all of the products that we ship have a certain yin/yang effect on their audience and we have to figure out the balance of the good and the bad. Mostly, shipping games is the high point to me and then finding what my favourite aspect of that game is and honestly hoping that it aligns with what the audience's favourite aspect of the game is. Because at least then you know that your tastes and your ideas are pulling in the right direction.
Kiki: I think the studio has grown and, as with any studio that has been around for a number of years, it has changed and shifted, so it's hard to say what was the high point for the studio. I think you can point at a number of high points and, to Frank's point, shipping a game always qualifies. I think there was definitely intense emotional resonance when we shipped *Halo 4* because it was our first big outing together. As a team, it really became the foundation of how we built moving forward. All of the games we shipped had been an accomplishment for us, back to the original point, because we learned from every one. It makes us better as we move forward.

What about low points for the studio?
Frank: Millions of them [laughs]. One of the hardest burdens we've had and that any studio would have in this situation (and I know the *Call Of Duty* developers deal with this) is that we're not seen the progenitors of the franchise, in old-school fans' eyes, certainly. One caveat is that we're really talking about certainly your audience and online gaming enthusiasts are fully aware of the Bungie transition. The fact of the matter is that most of our audience isn't aware of that. They ignore all of the logos that flash up at the start of games or movies, for that

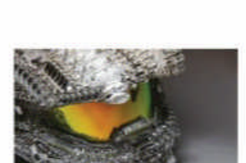


The Halo World Championship is one area where 343 has seen nothing but expansion and success as this offshoot of the eSports scene is one of the most successful single-game series in the world.

The iconic Mjolnir Powered Assault Armor has seen some changes over the years, but with each new launch of big Xbox event, you can bet it will make an appearance

matter, and just judge the experience on its own merits. That's the relief, but that's certainly a little bit of a burden and a little bit of gravity that we've had to carry with us the whole time. The irony for me is I've been through that transition and unlike most of our staff I've been at Bungie when things have gone wrong at the start of a launch. I remember when we launched *Halo 2*, most people have forgotten this but the pistol and the grenade balance on launch day was widely considered disastrous, so there was quick work by Paul Bertone [design lead] and the team to fix it, but we had to live through that. There was literally a website called Halo2sucks.com, so I am pretty used to it and my skin is truly calloused at this point. It's just a big honest knuckle and palm at this point, my entire body. The rest of the team at 343, especially the new guys, they are not used to the negatives that come with that. They maybe take it probably a little more personally, but in some way that's a good thing because it drives them to better the game and better the experience and better their own skills. It's kind of an artifice and game teams aren't made up of three guys for 15 years. It's multiple shifts and staffs and culture and behaviour. Thinking about these things as monolithic entities, I think, is a mistake. To me personally, it's about a continuum of people, behaviour, culture and ability rather than a singular element.

> I DON'T THINK IT'S ANY SECRET THAT THE LAUNCH OF MASTER CHIEF COLLECTION WAS A CHALLENGE EXTERNALLY AND INTERNALLY. IT WAS REALLY PAINFUL FOR A LOT OF REASONS



This crystal Master Chief helmet was made as part of the promotion of *Halo 5: Guardians* and was auctioned for charity. The winning bid was $34,300.

Kiki: I don't think it's any secret that the launch of *Master Chief Collection* was a challenge externally and internally. It was really painful for a lot of reasons. From a purely tactical reason sourcing the issues after all of the testing that we had done, it was a pretty jarring moment. Just working through that with the team while at the same time working through all of the feedback and the valid responses from the community was emotionally difficult. We worked so hard to build trust with our audience and with the community as a new studio and developer for *Halo* that to lose that trust was pretty heartbreaking for us. There was certainly a lot learning in terms of testing process and how we move forward with real-world testing and simulated testing. But then on the other side, it was really starting to build the trust up again with the community and also being able to reflect on ourselves on how intensely emotional it was. I think we all get so tied up in the IP and our role as shepherds of the IP, so it felt personal, and not in a personal attack kind of way, but personal in a deeply saddening way. That was a big threshold moment for the studio I think in terms of how we go through something like that, both from an emotional and morale standpoint and from how do we learn and move forward and not have this happen again? On top of that is the really good game that rightfully had noise around its issues. And underlying that is a game that we do believe in. That was difficult as well.

How tough has the learning curve been from *Halo 4* to *Halo 5*?

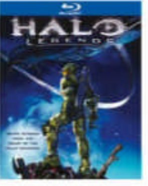
Frank: Moving from platform to platform is always a big leap. There's always something that you find out. Just to follow on Kiki's point, I think that if we'd expected it, if we weren't seeing test data and good results internally, we would have been maybe less traumatised by it. If we had been seeing that data we wouldn't have shipped it like that. It was a shock. But I think that the technical learnings on the jump between systems, between Xbox 360 and Xbox One and now PC, have been super valuable and have eventually let us scale test efforts across conflicting and complicated platform issues, which is kind of what tied us up in *MCC*. So certainly we've gotten better technically, we've gotten better at test discipline and test scale, more importantly. Just as a team we're always hiring amazing people and it's just about giving them the tools and »

Forge in *Halo 5: Guardians* has gone from strength to strength and is seeing some incredible, and sometimes hilarious, fan maps for players to test themselves against. You should check it out if you haven't recently.

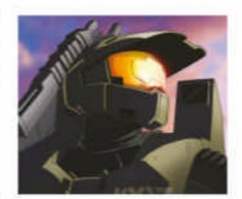
As the *Halo 5: Guardians* launch proved once again, the franchise is not only still massively popular, but also a massive deal to Microsoft itself as it put on events across the globe to celebrate.

THE 343 INDUSTRIES TIMELINE How the studio has been evolving since 2007

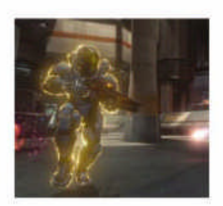
343 INDUSTRIES











Circa 2007
343 Industries is founded after Bungie makes the decision to go independent.

July 2009
Halo Legends anime announced, directed by Frank O'Connor

September 2009
Halo Waypoint is created, starting as a website and later launching as a Xbox 360 app

February 2010
The *Halo Legends* anime is released on Blu-Ray

November 2010
343 expands by hiring former Pandemic developers

February 2011
343 develops the *Defiant* and *Anniversary* map packs for *Halo: Reach*

November 2011
343 develops and releases *Halo: Combat Evolved Anniversary* to mark ten years since the original game's release

March 2012
343 takes complete control of the *Halo* franchise, including server and data management previously handled by Bungie

ability to excel at the things we hired them for in the first place. I think that right now there's a lot of forward-facing work that's near completion now in terms of our tools and our ability to iterate as well as our ability to innovate and build good systems to begin with. That's put us in a really good position for the future I think.

Kiki: I think that a lot of the learning for us is internally driven. We talk about putting a team together for the first time with *Halo 4* and learning how to work together and how to build a game together. Coming out of *Halo 4* and going into *Halo 5* it was, 'How do we work?' 'What are the production processes that work for this kind of team and what are the creative processes that work for a team that's made up of people from all over the world and all over the game industry?'. Then there's the learnings along the way for us as we look at how we want to expand and how we want to connect or not connect story. I think there's a lot of learnings along the way for us, 'Do we have a light connection between experiences?' 'Do we have a tight connection between experiences?'. I think we've figured out that some things work better in different instances. Then in a world where our audience getting older and we want to think about how we want to introduce the *Halo* universe to new audiences. It's different now than it was ten years ago in terms of making sure the universe feels inclusive to new people. I think that learning curve has all been driven by our own infrastructure and our own strategy and how we want to move the franchise forward.

How do you feel perception of 343 has changed over the years?

Frank: That depends on which set of the audience you're talking about. I think that the multiplayer audience thinks that we finally nailed [it] and I don't just mean for 343, but for *Halo*, that we finally made some needed changes to combat and mobility in a way that's acceptable to them. We've also given them some amazing tools to build their own things. I think that Forge is genuinely come into its own. We took some digs for storytelling in *Halo 5,* but they were absolutely merited. We very much realised that people wanted Master Chief's story of *Halo 5.* We definitely marketed it in a way that we hoped was going to bring surprise, but for some fans and certainly fans of Master Chief, it was a huge disappointment because they wanted more Chief. They loved Blue Team, they liked Osiris, but they wanted Chief. And that has been a big learning. Chief we tend to think of as kind of a vessel for your adventure rather than necessarily this major character in the universe. He's really just your entry into the universe. But people have become attached to him over the last 15 years and they've started to sort of fill in the gaps that the character deliberately has for gameplay reasons with a genuine emotional attachment. We certainly underestimated that with *Halo 5.* I think that most fans know that we have the technical chops to do this and it's surprising even when you're reading negative threads about any of our games there's significant optimism about what we're capable of. We just have to deliver on that and keep delivering on that. We've done a pretty good job with *Halo 5,* sustaining it, and that's the philosophy and that's the talent that we're taking forward. We're making significant changes too.

Kiki: I just go back to however long ago it was and people didn't know what 343 Industries was. I remember trying to hire for *Halo 4* and we couldn't talk about what the product was going to be and we were a completely unknown entity. We were essentially brought up as Microsoft. I think back to that time and I think about today and people understand with our successes and the things they like or don't like, people understand that 343 is a game studio that stands for making world-class games and experiences. That's a huge leap for us and certainly I can tangibly feel that shift in terms of our recruiting process and the people who come to us versus back in 2008-2009 when we were heavily recruiting, it was a challenge. That's very different today.



DOUBLING DOWN ON THE MASTER CHIEF STORY AND THE AMOUNT OF FOCUS ON HIM WAS PROBABLY THE EASIEST LEARNING FROM HALO 5

Do you feel Master Chief is as relevant today as he was ten years ago?

Frank: As I was saying he's weirdly become more and more relevant. I think certainly in *Halo: CE* he was deliberately almost an empty suit. He's just this fantastic way to enter somebody into the middle of a conflict. The effect that the character has on his surroundings and the 'fate of the galaxy' has had a resonant effect on fans over the years. It wasn't that surprising to me, but the volume of 'give us more Chief' at the end of *Halo 5* was significant and so I think if anything weirdly slightly more important now than he has ever been, certainly to our franchise. Instead of focusing on bringing new characters into the world and expanding the playable characters we've sort of shifted the focus a little bit to making the world a little bit more realistic and compelling and, I would say, more fun for players who get to inhabit the Chief in the future, pretty much as they have demanded. There's always a call and response element of shipping a game, you have to ship improvements, you have ship tweaks and you have to ship changes and sometimes you have to walk some of those back. Doubling down on the Master Chief story and the amount of focus on him was probably the easiest learning from *Halo 5.* That was a really simple thing to absorb and embrace.

The expansion of the *Halo* franchise includes new books, graphic novels and toy lines like this Mattel creation, bringing the universe to different audiences and enriching the experience for hardcore fans.





October **2012**
343's first live action *Halo* production, *Halo: Forward Unto Dawn,* is launched



November **2012**
Halo 4 released, beginning the Reclaimer Saga (originally announced as a trilogy)



July **2013**
Halo: Spartan Assault, a top-down shooter, is released



November **2014**
To mark ten years of *Halo 2, Halo: The Master Chief Collection* is released



November **2014**
Halo 5 prequel five-episode miniseries *Halo: Nightfall* launches



April **2015**
Halo: Spartan Strike, another top-down shooter lands on smartphones



October **2015**
343 Industries releases *Halo 5: Guardians* on Xbox One



February **2017**
343 works with Creative Assembly to produce *Halo Wars 2*

> WE'RE AT A GENUINELY EXCITING POINT INTERNALLY. A BUNCH OF STUFF THAT WE'RE WORKING ON FOR THE FUTURE IS COMING TOGETHER

Kiki: We do a lot of work outside of the games with our transmedia entertainment efforts and our toys and books and all of that. I think that Master Chief is the iconic representation of the [*Halo*] universe. He embodies the heroism and a little bit more now than maybe 15 years ago, the humanity of the universe and the idea of all that's at stake. There's hope and an ability to overcome. I think it's easy for us to sometimes forget because we are living night and day with him and through the game development process that he is that thing for people. He's not just a gameplay mechanic. So, I think that getting back to that realisation has been important and something we certainly try and focus on in a lot of the work we do outside of the games themselves, just because he is such a rich character. There's so much more to him that we can explore more easily outside of the games. He is so very rich for us there.

Looking at the industry right now, how would you assess *Halo*'s place within it?

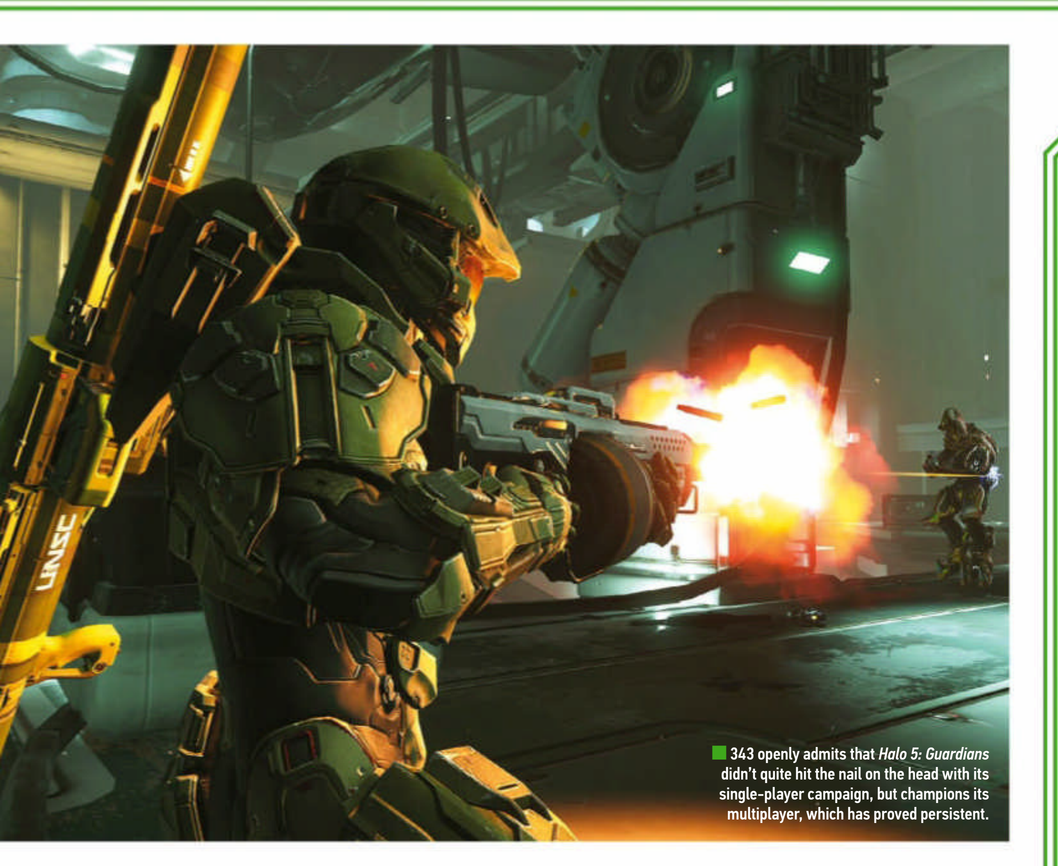
Frank: It's certainly much more competitive. I think that in the early days *Halo* kind of had that market to itself. It certainly paved the way for FPS to become a de facto triple-A standard on consoles. It didn't really invent anything, but it did manage to refine a bunch of systems and ideas so that to this day if you're now holding a controller and you go to you muscle memory for what it's like to play a FPS, you're effectively holding the original *Halo* controls. So we've had huge influence on our competitors and given them some guide posts to go ahead and become as good as *Halo* in some cases, much better in a lot of ways. There's this trading of effort and ability in the industry that's actually quite collegial. We do actually talk to each other at GDC and while everyone is competitive it's really built around passion for the art and the science of making games. That competition drives everyone, so that's not a bad thing at all. I think we're still highly important to Microsoft and the Xbox audience going forward. We always have that constant pressure and ultimate responsibility to not just make good games and make satisfying *Halo* games and satisfying *Halo* stories, but to innovate and push the platform forward as well. As we move into the console and PC space that gives us new challenges, but it also gives us some brand-new opportunities that we've never had before, so we're very excited about the future.

Kiki: I think any franchise that 15 years in is naturally just part of the life cycle you have to think about, what has worked in the past and what will work in the future. To Frank's point, it really is about pushing on innovation and the things that made *Halo* so popular and so iconic in those early Xbox days. We think a lot about what does it mean to think about bringing in a younger audience into *Halo*? I think that from a universe perspective it is multi-generational. We have parents who are now playing with their kids. And that's a pretty amazing place to be in. So, we think a lot about what that means for the franchise and what does that mean as we think about that younger audience and how they ingest the world around them. Are there experiences that we want to think about in the future that help bring that audience in and really introduces them to the universe and all of the experiences we have.





Apparently we caught Wolfkill and O'Connor a little by surprise with the news of 343's tenth anniversary was coming up this summer, but perhaps we set something in motion as a result.



343 openly admits that *Halo 5: Guardians* didn't quite hit the nail on the head with its single-player campaign, but champions its multiplayer, which has proved persistent.

What should we expect from the future of the *Halo* series?

Frank: Expect it to get better. That's our number-one goal, always – and it always has been. I'd love to tell you what to expect from the *Halo* series going forward, but I can't. We're at a genuinely exciting point internally. A bunch of stuff that we're working on for the future is coming together. It's only 9:30am here, but it's magnificent. It's such a magnificent effort. I'm genuinely excited about it, I'm excited for playtests and for reveals that we have, even internally. I'm working on lots of bits of that, but I continue to be surprised by some of the ideas and the technology that we're building. But I can't, frankly, tell you what that specifically is. You're free to guess and surmise based on normal industry trends and patterns and cadence.

Kiki: I feel like the studio and the teams have hit their stride in terms of how they work together and finding their voice. Being at a point where they feel comfortable. We're shepherds of the IP, but we're also responsible for what the future of it is and I think the team really understands that and has internalised it and is energised by it.

It's a big year ahead for Xbox with Game Pass launching in Spring and Project Scorpio arriving towards the end of the year, so what excites you most about Xbox going forward?

Frank: I think Microsoft's plans for Xbox and the platform actually unshackles us a little bit, because Xbox One, frankly, is our target platform for the stuff we're working on next, but having the extra power that we have with PCs and extra infrastructure and with Scorpio coming, we can just make that game experience sing with the power that's at our disposal. I'm a tech nerd and also a game nerd and I think the potential for the those things and the comfortable tools and flexibility that Microsoft gives us to make sure that those core experiences are still perfect means that we're going to be able to feed into that ecosystem in really interesting and compelling ways.

Kiki: I also feel like the content creators and the game makers and platform are more aligned than ever in terms of us really focusing on the player. I think in the past we've had platforms delivering great features, but frankly with the pace of the hardware wars, there were sort of necessary turnovers, which is really hard on players, to reinvest in hardware. For us we have this long-term roadmap we develop to and it's very culturally aligned with the hardware and the platform in terms of, 'Let's figure out the right thing to do for the players in trying to make it as frictionless as possible while still being able to add features that matter'. For us, from a development perspective, that's incredible because it means we don't have to focus on a lot of giant overhauls. We can focus on the features that are going to both light up the platform, but also make it a great experience for players. That alignment has felt really meaningful for us.

343 INDUSTRIES™

WHAT NEXT FOR HALO'S MULTIMEDIA PROJECTS?

STUDIO HEAD KIKI WOLFKILL REFLECTS ON 343'S SUCCESSES AND WHAT COMES NEXT

343 hasn't just been responsible for releasing *Halo*'s console titles. A massive part of the studio's role as the custodian of the franchise is that it also oversees and is deeply involved in the production of the series' multimedia efforts. That includes TV shows, print media and any potential movies. We asked studio head Kiki Wolfkill how she thought this area of the business had gone do far. "I feel good about what we've done and I feel that we've learned a lot," she says, although she seems to think it could be doing a better job of opening up *Halo* to new audiences. "I think that we did a lot of work a few years ago to really tightly bind a lot of the different pieces and I think that started to feel a little impenetrable to parts of the audience who hadn't been with us for 12 to 15 years. We look at it today much more around the elements of the universe and where users or viewers or players may want to explore more, and also what are just great stories to tell. We'll make sure that they make sense in the context of other experiences that we may be releasing at the same time and that have meaning together for the people who are really deeply into the lore, but also work completely as standalone. And so I think that if we look back at a lot of the transmedia projects that we've done I think we've had a lot of good learnings from them and a lot of good success from them."

But what about what comes next? Apparently the long-awaited Steven Spielberg TV show with the Showtime network in America is still happening. "I'm really excited about the things that we have moving forward because I think we've taken all of the learnings with some of these smaller projects. I'm thinking ahead to the television series we're working on with Showtime and Steve Spielberg and some other things that we're incubating right now, which feel really authentic to the universe and yet really express a different perspective on it. To me, that's exciting. Early on with 343 we wanted to be so careful, which I think was the right thing to do. Careful with the audience, being true to what is understood about *Halo*. I think we're in a place now where we feel much more comfortable expressing the universe in different ways and still feel authentic, but definitely offer a little bit of a different flavour."



New 'n' Tasty!
ODDWORLD: ABE'S ODDYSEE
LIMITED EDITION
XEODRIFTER
PUTTY SQUAD
RAYMAN ORIGINS
LONE SURVIVOR
CURVE
Corpse Party
BUILDERS
PS VITA
Only On PlayStation
OCTODAD
DADLIEST CATCH
RAINBOW MOON
GOD OF WAR COLLECTION
Operation Abyss
TEARAWAY
P4G
PERSONA 4 GOLDEN
ATLUS
SPECIAL EDITION
Dragon Fantasy
MUTEKI
AKIBA'S TRIP
ODDWORLD
STRANGER'S WRATH HD
INCLUDES 6 DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT PACKS
Xtreme Legends
Complete Edition
VOLUME
THE SWAPPER
FUTURIDIUM
EARTH DEFENSE FORCE 2
INVADERS FROM PLANET SPACE
One Way Heroics
SPIKE CHUNSOFT
STEALTH INC 2
ULTIMATE EDITION



PS VITA Dead And Loving It

WE SPEAK TO THE KEY PUBLISHERS WHO ARE STILL BREATHING LIFE INTO SONY'S BEST KEPT SECRET

Ask the average gamer about the current state of Sony's PlayStation Vita and they'll most likely confidently reply that the console's been dead in the water for some time. It's a valid comment to make, particularly when you consider the number of great Vita games that rarely get covered in today's mainstream gaming press, but it's not wholly accurate. In fact, if we're completely honest, it's downright wrong.

There were 126 games were released for the PS Vita last year – sure, a large number of them were digital or exist only as weird and exotic delicacies in Japan, but they're out there and they add further weight to the proof that Sony's supposedly-dead console is actually doing surprisingly well, particularly when you consider that Sony's last big physical release for the system was 2014's *Freedom Fighters*. So what went wrong for Sony's second portable, and why does it now have such a vibrant and passionate community, one that's easily comparable to the Dreamcast, another console that failed to do the business in the eyes of consumers?

It all started off well for the handheld. It was the successor to the PSP, a system that eventually shifted more than 80 million units – in comparison, the six-year-old Vita is struggling to hit the 5 million mark in Japan – and its launch lineup and early period of releases were absolutely stellar, with epic triple-A blockbusters such as *Uncharted Golden Abyss, WipEout 2048, Gravity Rush* and *Killzone Mercenaries* all looking like they could have been released on PS3. But support for the system slowly began to dry up, not as quickly as on the Wii U, but at a rapid enough pace to suggest that big hitters such as Activision, Electronic Arts, Ubisoft and even Sony, weren't happy with the direction the console was heading in. "I think triple-A tent pole games are critical to a platform's mainstream success, and the decline of the system coincided with the decline of those releases," says Brain Provinciano, the creator of *Retro City Rampage* and a huge supporter of Sony's console. "As much as I love indie games personally, I don't think a mainstream platform can succeed on a large scale with them alone."

> A FOCUSED LIBRARY FILLED WITH UNIQUE NICHE GAMES THAT YOU WOULDN'T FIND ON ANY OTHER PLATFORM
> JOSH FAIRHURST, LIMITED RUN GAMES

Sony's choice of proprietary memory cards also added to the woes of the system. While plenty of physical Vita games were available, the company was also aggressively pushing digital sales for the console, particularly with the release of many acclaimed PSone and PSP games that all look absolutely fantastic the Vita's OLED screen. Its memory cards were stupidly overpriced, however, with the 4GB and 8GB being largely pointless due to their lack of sensible capacity, and the more desirable 16GB and 32GB offerings costing a staggering $69.99 and $119.99 on release – ludicrous when you consider the Wi-Fi-only version of the console was launching at $249. Sony eventually released a 64GB card in Japan, but even with eventual price reductions it's rare to pick one up for less than £70, something that Josh Fairhurst, one half of the duo running Limited Run Games, a company still publishing games for the Vita, finds particularly galling. "Most games released on Vita are only available digitally and many are 1GB or larger. A 64GB memory card may only be able to hold 20-50 games and it costs nearly as much as a used Vita console!"



INSIDE DANGANRONPA

PRODUCER, YOSHINORI TERASAWA DISCUSSES ONE OF VITA'S BIGGEST FRANCHISES

What sets *Danganronpa* apart from similar games?
[The way] you can make selections from character's actions is what sets *Danganronpa* aside from other mystery solving games. I believe other mystery games do not have this much action. Furthermore, it is a mystery game, but the characters in the story do not seek to actually solve the mystery. Instead, they choose the 'Blackened One' by any means necessary, although we end up completely solving the mystery by the end. (laughs).

Why doesn't it feature multiple endings?
Each character is considered as a main character, therefore each of their lives and their deaths have a significant meaning. This is beautifully woven into one story by Kodaka, so it is very difficult to create another ending. However, we have included bonus content for fans that want to enjoy a 'what-if' scenario.

How did the creation of Monokuma come about?
The *Danganronpa* series has a strong horror side to it, so we felt that we needed a character to be a symbol that would represent the storyteller and the bad guy, which resulted in the creation of Monokuma. Monokuma was created by the scenario maker Kodaka and the character designer Mr. Komatsuzaki. They started off with a quick sketch over a conversation, and I heard that within 15 minutes they came up with a design. I often see Monokuma's personality in Kodaka. I can say for certain that Monokuma is part of Kodaka's character [laughs].

How did you choose the content for *Danganronpa 3*'s limited edition?
The art book and strap were a very popular item in past editions, so we followed tradition and put them in the limited edition. The soundtrack is also a standard item that comes in limited editions. As for the anime, last year we did a *Danganronpa 3* animation and we felt that would resonate with Anime fans well, so we went for it. By making Nagito Komaeda the main character, we felt that fans from previous editions would be very happy with our choice.

Perhaps the biggest nail in the Vita's coffin, though, was Sony's proud reveal of Remote Play for the PlayStation 4 in June 2013. A greatly enhanced version of what had been available for PS3, it works extremely well and massively opened up the Vita's library of games (providing of course that you had a good enough internet connection). It can't be a shock to learn that it's also the point that you could start seeing support for big triple-A publishers dropping off from the system. After all, why spend additional millions making a game for a small pool of players, when they can easily access and enjoy (odd button issues aside) your existing PS4 games? We're big fans of remote play, but we also feel it was a crushing blow to the console.

While the PS Vita barely registers a pulse in the West, it's still doing exceptionally well in Japan, supported by some of the country's biggest publishers, including Square Enix, Namco Bandai, Koei Tecmo, Idea Factory, Atlus, Sega and NIS America. So what has allowed these companies to thrive and why is Sony's system still so popular there? "Commuting via train to work is the norm and commutes can be in excess of one hour one way," reveals Alan Costa, NIS America's senior associate producer. "It makes sense then that a dedicated gaming handheld would be a great way to occupy the time. Although this has recently been changing, the Vita has often had exclusives that have contributed to its popularity in Japan."

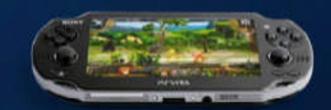
Arianne Advincula, Idea Factory's marketing coordinator is in agreement with Alan, but she also feels that specifically targeted games have helped the machine gain interest with certain types of gamers. "Idea Factory games appeal to gamers who like Japanese-style video games and PlayStation Vita games appeal to Japanese players. So, it only makes sense that they would continue to put their titles on the PS Vita." For Josh Fairhurst it just comes down to ensuring gamers have the games they actually want to play. "For me, it's the perfect platform for visual novels, shoot-'em-ups and RPGs," he explains. "It's easy to develop for versus the 3DS (and more powerful) and the beautiful widescreen display makes these genres really shine on the platform. I feel like if those genres were more mainstream in the West, the Vita would be much more successful here. Unfortunately, the Vita was marketed in the West as a triple-A portable and in hindsight I don't think that really played to the console's true strengths."

> "THE VITA, LIKE PSP BEFORE IT, HAS MANY UNIQUE, QUALITY TITLES ON IT THAT ARE QUINTESSENTIALLY JAPANESE"
> ALAN COSTA, NIS AMERICA

Despite questionable marketing in the West, the Vita nonetheless has an excellent community of passionate gamers there, many of whom are big collectors of the console. Facebook groups like PS Vita Gamers Unite! have become robust communities for members, while Vita exclusive websites like TheVitaLounge and Vita Player remain dedicated to sharing the news that passes many bigger multiformat sites by. One such supporter of the Vita is Karim Delawalla who currently has every available English-language PS Vita game, some 250 titles. "I love the Vita," he tells us, "I like the quality and variety of games. While the Vita may be heavy on RPGs, there is still a variety of great games and the Facebook group Playstation Vita/PSP Collectors definitely motivated me to collect for it." So as a loyal follower of the machine how does he feel about Sony's current support in the West? "Well it's currently non-existent except for giving discounts on the PS store," he reveals. "As I write this, I recently read an article about how PS Now support on the Vita is going to be pulled next year. I understand that business decisions have to be made and the Vita is now quite an old console, but it's still frustrating. Sony needed to fully back the Vita by releasing more first-party titles than they did and made it more accessible by sticking to standard



Many collectors are now turning to Asian suppliers like HeavyArm U-Store and Play-Asia for English-language versions of games that didn't receive physical releases in Europe



DESIRABLE COLLECTIBLES

THE VITA GAMES THAT ARE ON THE RISE

AR NOSURGE PLUS

Subtitled, *Ode To An Unborn Star*, Gust Co's sci-fi tinged RPG is an enhanced port of the PS3 game. An extremely small print run now means it's one of the most expensive Western games you can buy.

EXPECT TO PAY:
£250 - £350

NEW 'N' TASTY: ODDWORLD: ABE'S ODDYSEE

Another early Limited Run Game with another extremely low print run (2,500 units). Its current asking price will make you regret you never picked it up for $25 on release.

EXPECT TO PAY:
£100+

ATELIER ESCHA & LOGY PLUS: ALCHEMISTS OF THE DUSK SKY

This coveted limited edition never received a European release, which has pushed up its desirability. You're doing extremely well if you can get it for under three figures.

EXPECT TO PAY:
£150 – £250

SUPERDIMENSION NEPTUNE VS SEGA HARD GIRLS

The *Neptunia* limited editions always sell out quickly, so it was no surprise to see this highly anticipated crossover immediately sell out.

EXPECT TO PAY:
£90 – £120

BREACH & CLEAR

For many this is the jewel in the crown of any Vita collection. Only 1,500 copies of the game were produced by Limited Run, making it stupidly hard to get hold of.

EXPECT TO PAY:
£150-£200

PERSONA 4 DANCING ALL NIGHT

The rising popularity of the *Persona* series means that this over-the-top boxset is only going to rise in price, especially if it's still sealed.

EXPECT TO PAY:
£50 – £80

RETRO CITY RAMPAGE

Brian Provinciano's highly-entertaining homage to the NES and Eighties gaming is rumoured to be getting a reprint. If that's the case, expect the current price to drop.

EXPECT TO PAY:
£40 – £100

YS: MEMORIES OF CELCETA

With a new game released later this year, expect interest in this lavish boxset to rise even higher, especially as it was only released in the states.

EXPECT TO PAY:
£50 – £80





BUILDING GRAND KINGDOM

GRAND KINGDOM'S TOMOHIKO DEGUCHI ON THE BEST VITA GAME YOU'VE NOT PLAYED

Where did the idea for *Grand Kingdom* originate?
Mr Watanabe, a producer at Spike Chunsoft, was a fan of my previous game ***Grand Knights History*** and told me he would like to work together on a game that carried on that legacy. I also personally wanted to create an RPG with the theme of mercenaries.

Have you been surprised by its cult status?
We put our blood, sweat and tears into this game, so it makes me extremely happy to know that people enjoy the game. We take all the encouragement of our fans and continue to create titles that many people can enjoy.

What makes it so suited for play on Vita?
In Japan, people commute to work via train, so this was a main Vita target. Further, with the Vita, we also thought that game lent itself to a style where people would be able to take on quests on the go and participate in the online war portion at home.

What was the hardest thing to create from a gameplay point of view?
The development team was only about 15 people, which is extremely small for a project, and it was difficult to create the many assets the game requires. However, because the team was small, communication was comparatively smooth and thanks to that, we were able to create this complicated game.



memory cards. We would be looking at the Vita very differently if that was the case."

It's fortunate then that Limited Run Games, NIS America, Idea Factory and PQube remain strong supporters of the system in the West, creating exclusive low print runs of previously digital-only games in the case of Limited Run, or delivering lavish limited editions of big hitters such as *Danganronpa 3*, the *Hyperdimension Neptunia* games and *Steins; Gate Zero*. Limited Run in particular has become a big player in the West, with its focus on targeting the system with key releases ranging from *Thomas Was Alone, The Swapper, OddWorld: Stranger's Wrath* and *Soldner X2* delighting and frustrating collectors in equal measure.

While many love physical versions, the range of PS Vita and PS4 games have become the target of scalpers, who take advantage of the small print runs and the ability to often order two games at a time. "Initially it was just this self-serving goal to put my own games (*Breach & Clear and Saturday Morning RPG*) into a box," recalls Fairhurst about setting the company up. "I hated that my digital games would have no legacy and would disappear into the digital ether when PSN on Vita inevitably shuts down. I wanted to preserve them even if no one else really cared. When we saw the response to our *Breach & Clear* release, it was clear that we needed to support the Vita in a much higher capacity than we originally planned. The fanbase on this platform is amazing and we want to do whatever we can to bring them more physical games." Costa is also aware of the strong thirst for exclusive Japanese games here and it's allowed NIS America to become a prominent player thanks to the incredible success of the *Danganronpa* and *Persona* franchises. "Our mission is to bring Japanese entertainment to fans in the West," he continues. "The Vita, like PSP before it, has many unique, quality titles on it that are quintessentially Japanese. Fans have caught on to what's available on the platform and they know who is providing it.

Of course, we can't talk about games that are 'quintessentially Japanese', without briefly focusing on the 'Waifu' games that can be found on the Vita. While titles like the *Senran Kagura* games can be seen as the Vita equivalent of *Carry On* films, due to the ridiculous antics of their big bosomed protagonists, the likes of *Gal*Gun Double Peace, Dungeon Travellers 2, Monster Monpiece, Criminal Girls* and *Dead Or Alive Xtreme 3* – which received such a backlash that Koei Tecmo decided against releasing it in the West – have received far more criticism, as they effectively allow the player to rub and touch the young female protagonists to do anything from level-up characters to simply advance the story. The primary argument in their defense is that it's Japanese developers responding to a clear niche in the market born of cultural norms that are different from those in the West. Understandably, that's not stopped the Vita and these titles from coming under fire. "Each of us has their own personal tastes and what makes us happy," is Advincula's take on such games. "I'm just as passionate about my own hobbies and interests and can relate to fans who know what they want, especially when I've had the pleasure of meeting plenty of them."



Limited editions have helped many third-party publishers build a thriving fanbase on the PS Vita. You'll need deep pockets mind...





Limited Run Games typically sell out on the day of release, making them highly collectible and very expensive if you miss out.

As over-the-top and controversial as some Vita games are, they pale in comparison to the many lavish boxsets that exist on the system, which in turn make Sony's console highly desirable. Typically the vanguard of big triple-A releases, virtually every physical game from NIS America, PQube and Idea Factory comes with an equally elaborate box set that range in price from £40 to £80 and very quickly sell out, leading to astronomical prices online. It's become a crucial stream of revenue for many Vita publishers, so great care is taken during their creation. "At Idea Factory International, it is part of the marketing team's job to propose and handle the creation of the limited edition items," confirms Advincula. "We also work closely with the design and production team to finalise how the collector's box and packaging will look. Of course, we also work with the original licensors in Japan in order to approve each item we make for these limited editions." Costa also feels that they offer great value for those buying them. "Japanese games often offer a unique world or setting in which players love to lose themselves," he reveals. "A good LE helps the player get closer to the worlds and characters they love, so we spend a lot of time incorporating user feedback to make LEs that our users enjoy. The LE market is very important to us because it allows us to help directly connect our fans with the worlds in the games. A quality localisation is also paramount to the game's reception and we take that aspect of the project very seriously. The team begins looking at the game early on to get a feel for it and a translator works closely with an editor to ensure the text is faithful to the original while still being natural English."

The critical combination of quirky Japanese releases, high-quality limited editions and a continuing stream of titles from Limited Run (it's currently publishing *Runner 2*, it's 20th Vita release) has made Sony's console into a highly desirable system for collectors, who are flocking to the machine; which in turn is convincing many publishers to stay with the system. "I like to think of the Vita as the Dreamcast of its time," concludes Fairhurst. "I love my Dreamcast for the same reason I love my Vita: a focused library filled with unique niche games that you wouldn't find on any other platform. In the same vein as the Dreamcast, the Vita is the underdog, the diamond in the rough that the mainstream is missing out on. It's an easy platform to feel passionate about. As a diehard fan myself, I take every opportunity I get to sell people on the Vita. Once they get one and start diving into the library, they get it and they become diehard too."

> "I THINK TRIPLE-A TENT POLE GAMES ARE CRITICAL TO A PLATFORM'S MAINSTREAM SUCCESS, AND THE SYSTEM'S DECLINE COINCIDED WITH THE DECLINE OF THOSE RELEASES"
>
> Brian Provinciano, VBlank Entertainment

Provinciano, who is still planning to release a physical version of his incoming game, *Shakedown: Hawaii*, is also convinced there's still plenty of life in Sony's forgotten console. "I absolutely love the PS Vita. I'm a handheld gamer first and foremost, and think there will be enough players still to support the cost of porting. There may not be enough to recoup on an exclusive title, but the other platforms can subsidise the cost. What I really hope, is to finish another game after *Shakedown* while there's still enough life left on the Vita to cover the cost of porting that too!"

There's every chance that the recent release of Nintendo's Switch will eventually seal the system's fate, particularly if it becomes a big success in Japan, and staunch Vita supporters, including NIS America and Limited Run already have their eyes on Nintendo's hybrid console to see how it fares there. For now though, Sony's PS Vita is very much alive and kicking so why not give it a try? In doing so you'll discover one of the most diverse and interesting libraries of any current console.

Special thanks to Greg Tucker for the use of *Ar Nosurge Plus* and *Atelier Escha* and *Logy Plus*.





DOMINATING THE VITA

JOSH FAIRHUST ON THE SUCCESS OF LIMITED RUN GAMES

Did you expect Limited Run Games to become so popular?
Not at all. I knew we'd have some modicum of success but I thought we'd cap out at an audience of 2,000 in a few years. Those expectations were shattered when we put out ***Breach & Clear*** and it sold out in two hours. We never saw that coming!

How do you go about choosing games?
It's a split between developers coming to us and us going to them. My cofounder, Douglas Bogart, and I play a ton of games so we have an ongoing list of games we'd like to publish because we really enjoyed them ourselves. Some of these games may not be the highest rated games in the world, but they're games we liked so we know others will feel the same.

What are you doing to combat the scalpers that stop fans from buying your games?
Douglas [Bogart] watches orders as they roll in on sales day and cancels any and all orders that break our set limits. Once a sale has been completed, before shipping starts, he meticulously combs the shipping manifest for duplicate addresses and banned customers. We go through a pretty crazy process to make sure that people play along with our set rules.

Are there any big games you've been unable to secure?
Yes, there are three that are sore spots for me. Out of respect for the developers, I can't name specific titles. Two of them were from the same developer and they pretty much just said that they had no intention to return to the games to do further distribution. The other is one we've been trying to secure since we started. At one point we were even on the verge of finally signing a deal! Unfortunately, the decision to work with us doesn't lie with the developer.

Would you consider reprinting any of your earlier runs which have sold out?
We don't actually have any legal right to. Our contracts are structured in a way such that all rights revert back to the developers upon our version selling out. After the rights are back with the developer, the decision to reprint independently is on them. You won't see reprints coming from us, but you can take solace in knowing that we don't lock anything up in a vault.

TACOMA

THE FULLBRIGHT TEAM TELLS US HOW IT'S BUILDING A SCI-FI WORLD YOU CAN BELIEVE WITH ITS FOLLOW-UP TO GONE HOME

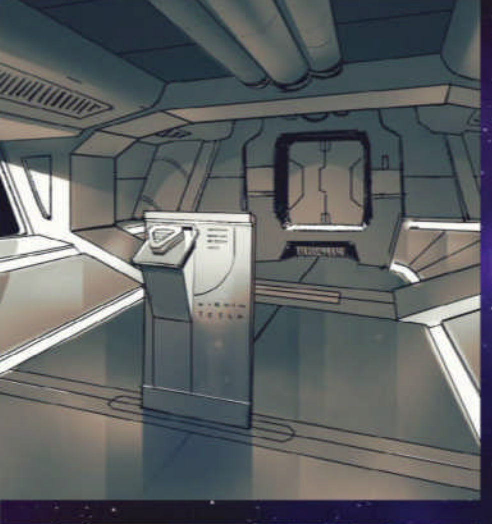
As you begin *Tacoma* and your contracted AI Communications Specialist Amy Ferrier signs in to access the titular abandoned space station, she logs in with sign language to spell her name on the augmented reality interface. It's a small moment, one that will likely be repeated as the game progresses and your player character needs to interact with more systems further on in the station, but it's a choice that carries interesting analogues throughout Fullbright's follow-up to *Gone Home*.

Issues surrounding communication lie at the heart of the biggest challenges and biggest successes of *Tacoma*, a game in which Fullbright is attempting to bring its brand of intimate, relatable character-driven storytelling to a more fantastical and eye-catching stage. The familiar hallways and bedrooms of *Gone Home* have been replaced by zero gravity and augmented reality playbacks, but the core principles remain the same.

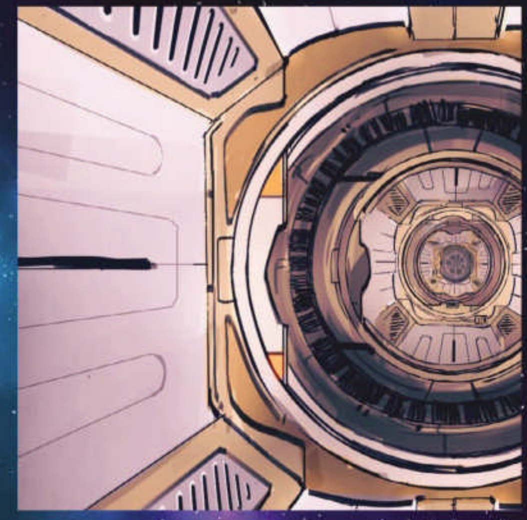
"I think our outlook with the games that we've made with *Tacoma* and *Gone Home* and, in some parts, when Karla [Zimonja, Fullbright cofounder] and I were working on *Minerva's Den* together, is this idea that through the mechanics that we provide to the player we have the ability to give players access to the details of who these people are and what their thought processes are and what their life experience is like as an individual," says Steve Gaynor, fellow Fullbright cofounder. "That was the real gambit with *Gone Home*, the idea that if we can make a story that's about ordinary people that could have happened to people that you could know in your own life, but through the experience of the game we can let you get to know these people to a degree where you're not invested in their story because it's the fate of the world hanging in the balance, but because you understand them."

That was a bold move to attempt when *Gone Home* was launched in 2013, but one that proved to be hugely effective. *Tacoma* is more ambitious, not least because of its larger scale and more spectacular setting, and Gaynor insists the intention remains the same. "I think that the flipside of that with *Tacoma* is to say that even in a setting that is not part of our own life experience and that is very pushed and sci-fi, it's a space station with an AI on it, in spite of it all, what you do in the game lets you see how the people who are living through that are still just people that are reacting to things the way that anybody might."

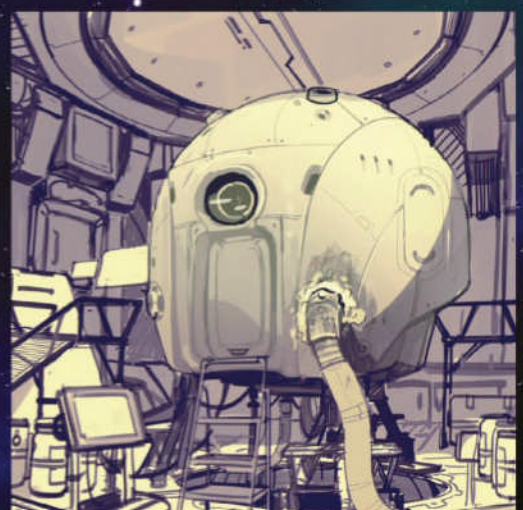
The challenge the team created for itself was how to sell the futuristic setting for its new game without losing the intimacy of the experience. The answer was to merge the two things by using an augmented reality playback of events on the station, bringing »

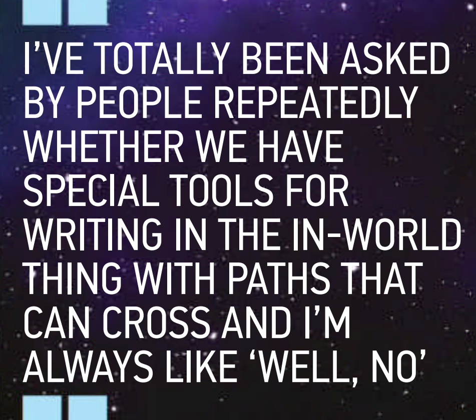




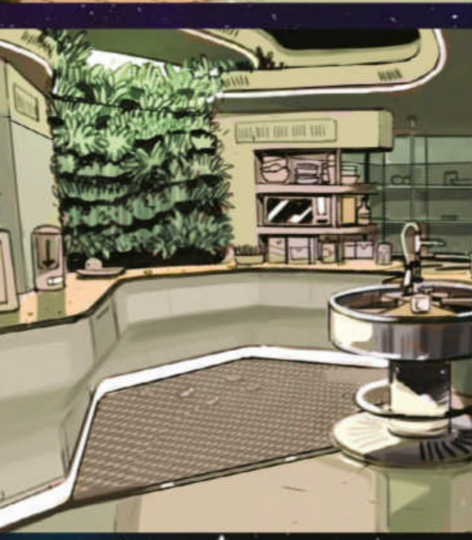


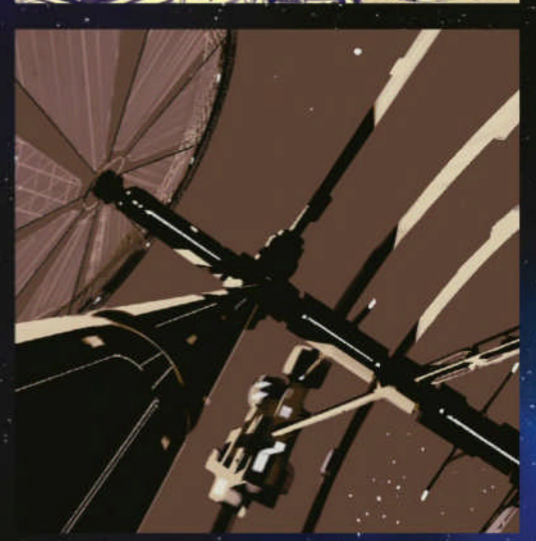


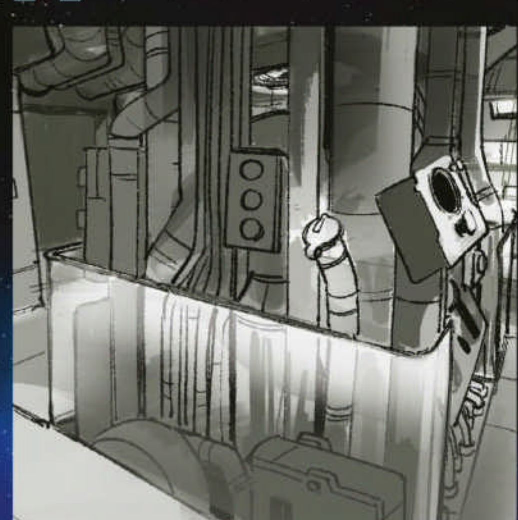


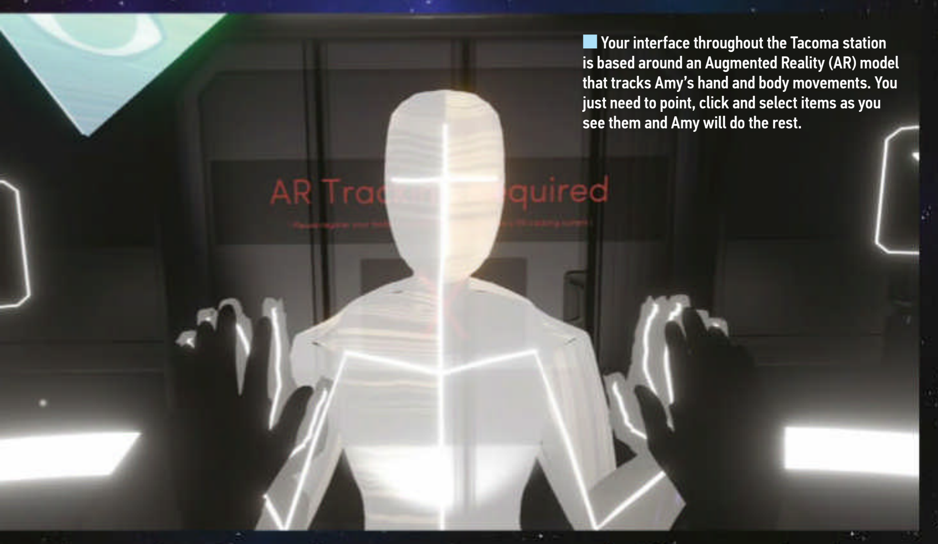


"I'VE TOTALLY BEEN ASKED BY PEOPLE REPEATEDLY WHETHER WE HAVE SPECIAL TOOLS FOR WRITING IN THE IN-WORLD THING WITH PATHS THAT CAN CROSS AND I'M ALWAYS LIKE 'WELL, NO'"









Your interface throughout the Tacoma station is based around an Augmented Reality (AR) model that tracks Amy's hand and body movements. You just need to point, click and select items as you see them and Amy will do the rest.



The crew of the space station are represented by these outlines that track their body movements and locations. Each is colour coded to a particular individual and has a logo on their back to identify their role on the team. It makes pointing each of them out much easier.

the characters you're investigating to life in a way that text or audio recording alone wouldn't be able to do. You can watch these scenes of relative domesticity play out in real time, but they are often broken up across a room and happening simultaneously. You can then pause and rewind the events, moving around the space yourself to hear new pieces of dialogue or see what characters were interacting with. The first thought that popped into our minds was what an immense writing challenge scripting a game like this was likely to have been.

"I've totally been asked by people repeatedly whether we have special tools for writing in the in-world thing with paths that can cross and I'm always like 'well, no'," says Zimonja, punctuating it with a laugh. "We ended up doing it in normal script format, but sort of modularising the chunks. So, when a couple of people would break off to talk to one another that would be Thread A and if one of them left to form a sub-conversation elsewhere then we would name that separately so that we could move back and forth between the dialogue chunks. We ended up colouring them. We were just trying to make it approachable for our brains."

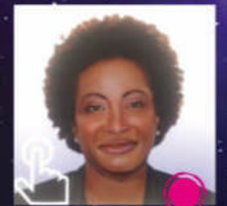
This was then recorded in an early voice acting session that revealed where conversations were too long or too short to join up with other things happening in a scene. Gaynor compares the challenge to that faced by a filmmaker trying to create a classic 'walk and talk' scene. "You're like, 'The camera is going to be going here so these people need to walk and talk and be here by the time the camera comes around the corner'. All of that kind of coordination stuff. But it's every scene in our entire game [laughs]."

It's through these scenes that we get to see the Tacoma station crew interact with one another. They talk about their lives and go about their regular jobs; they talk about happenings on the station, about how they are missing their homes and about each other. They reveal all sorts of details and draw you into the experience, just as listening to tapes and reading notes did in *Gone Home* – however in this instance it has been hugely assisted by the performances and how the actors interact with one another.

MEET THE CREW OF THE TACOMA

Here's a little insight into the excellent cast of Fullbright's latest

E.V. ST. JAMES
STATION ADMINISTRATOR



Played by
DAWNN LEWIS

Lewis may be best known to some of our readers of a certain age as Jaleesa Vinson in ***The Cosby Show*** spinoff ***A Different World***. More recently she has done a lot of voice work as well as live-action performing lending her voice to ***Futurama*** as LaBarbara Conrad, ***The Cleveland Show***, ***Rick & Morty*** and many more.

CLIVE SIDDIQI
OPERATIONS SPECIALIST



Played by
TJ RAMINI

Another recognisable face from his roles on ***24***, ***the Bill*** and ***Twisted***, Ramini has done some excellent voice work in the videogame world working on ***Sleeping Dogs***, ***Dota 2***, ***Diablo III*** and ***Bayonetta 2***. He was also the voice of Salim in ***Uncharted 3*** and credited for the character's multiplayer appearance in ***Uncharted 4***.

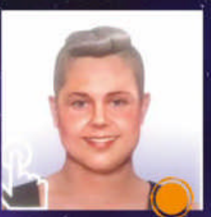
NATALI KUROSHENKO
NETWORK SPECIALIST



Played by
NATASHA LORING

Loring's acting career is relatively new compared to some of her co-stars, but she's still managed to chalk up credits in ***Telltale's Game Of Thrones*** as Sera Flowers, ***Star Wars: The Old Republic***, ***Uncharted 4*** and ***Civilisation VI***. Clearly she's something of an up and comer in the voice acting game.

ROBERTA 'BERT' WILLIAMS,
MECHANICAL ENGINEER



Played by
ABIGAIL MARLOWE

With roles in projects as diverse as ***Captain America: The Winter Soldier***, ***Community*** and ***Alpha House***, Marlowe seems adept and pretty much anything that gets thrown at her. No surprise then to see that her gaming credits are growing too with ***Halo Wars 2***, ***Masquerada*** and ***Lego Jurassic World*** harnessing her talent.

SAREH HASMADI
MEDIC



Played by
EVA LA DARE

As well as working extensively with Capcom as the voice of Elena in recent ***Street Fighter*** outings and doing motion capture for her role as Sheva in ***Resident Evil 5***, La Dare has made appearances in some pretty big shows such as ***How To Get Away With Murder***, ***The Mindy Project*** and a recurring role in ***Baskets*** with Zach Galifianakis.

ANDREW DAGYAB
BOTANIST



Played by
GREG CHUN

Trying to list all of Chun's gaming credits would take up far too much space, so here are a few highlights from the last eight years: ***League Of Legends***, ***Diablo III***, ***World Of Warcraft: Mists Of Pandaria***, ***Smite***, ***Fallout 4***, ***The Division***, ***Overwatch***, ***Fire Emblem Heroes*** and ***Nier: Automata***. He's done a lot of good work.

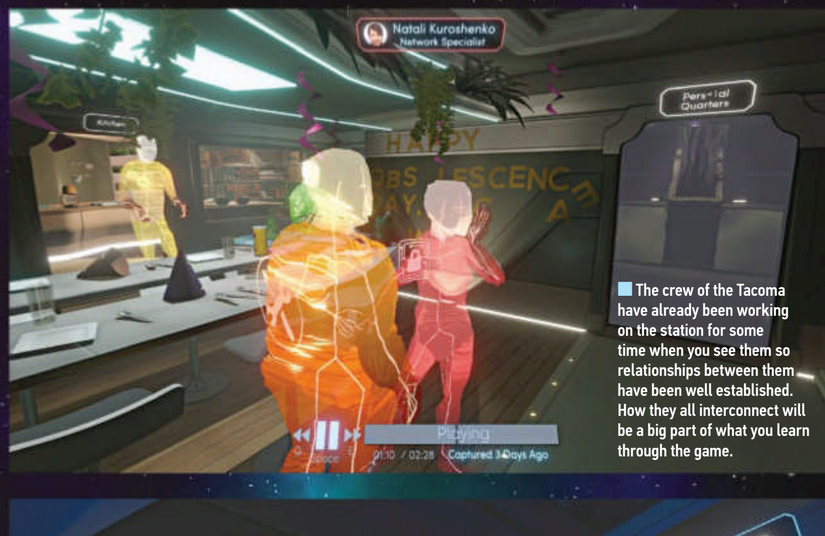
"We got the entire cast together on a sound stage to perform the scenes," reveals Gaynor. "The stuff that's actually in the game is two day's worth of recording back to back and then we recorded ODIN's voice and Amy, our player character's voice, who you don't hear in the demo, we recorded them separately as well as they aren't physically in the space with the actors."

"There's a chemistry and some sort of process that happens when actors can bounce off each other and respond directly to each other with exactly the right emotional level," adds Zimonja. "It really just makes realism and naturalism a lot easier to achieve. You're putting them in a place where they can naturally put themselves in the mode that the character would be in."

So, that's how *Tacoma* delivers its experience and how the performers managed to create an atmosphere that feels genuine and familiar even as you float in space, but the writing itself is still fairly unique in its grounded conversations and revelatory moments. Some of that is thanks to one of Fullbright's newer recruits. "I came from a background where I studied a lot of poetry when I was an undergrad a while ago now, so when I was learning to be a writer the kinds of things that I was learning to emphasise in my work were ordinary life experience," level designer Nina Freeman tells us. Freeman joined Fullbright having established herself as a solo developer with a long list of innovative story-driven experiences. "What I was really interested in was Seventies and Eighties New York City poets and a lot of their work, like Alan Ginsberg is probably the most famous one, but poets around this era were writing a lot about their personal lives. So my background was originally looking at a lot of work like that. And actually *Gone Home* was one of the first games that I played when I was getting into games and I saw that similar style of writing in that where I was like, 'Oh, this is a story about a real person or someone who could really exist in the world in a real scenario that I can imagine actually happening to someone'."

"The reason that we wanted to work with Nina was because of the stuff that she had done as an indie game developer," Gaynor adds. "She was still working on *Cibele* when she started working for us and finished that game while *Tacoma* was in production, but before that I played *How Do You Do It* and a text adventure that Nina made called *Mangia* and the perspective expressed in those that was about saying, 'I can take a very small, mundane or familiar moment or personal vignette from someone's life and make it approachable and accessible and it's in some places funny and inherently interactive'. Those are all the values that drive us that we're excited about in what we do and what we see in people's games. So, I think that even if influences or practices aren't extremely, concretely expressed, as a through line from one work to another, I think that we all share this mindset of having similar values of what we want to accomplish together as a team on a bigger game. I think that all of us want to try to do right by the characters and the story of the game."

That commitment lead to a rather massive decision during the production of *Tacoma*, to completely redesign the augmented reality playback interface and the design of the space station itself after initial demos and feedback suggested it wasn't quite clicking together. "What I always think is interesting is that the first version of the game that we were sending out and showing people was that first it had a completely different space, so the ship itself is a totally different level design," Freeman tells us. "But also, our original scenes that we're talking about right now didn't really have any interaction with them beyond just playing them from the start and watching them until the end and then restarting them. So, there was no active engagement. Now you can scrub through them like a tape and originally we didn't have that at all. Players could still follow threads that were separating and coming back together, but there wasn't as much of a sense of control over that. Of being able to really follow threads in more of an expressive way by being able to go back a couple of seconds." »



The crew of the Tacoma have already been working on the station for some time when you see them so relationships between them have been well established. How they all interconnect will be a big part of what you learn through the game.



Tacoma station is built of three rotating rings, each with simulated gravity and different facilities with a central column connecting them all together. This column is the zero-gravity section of the game.

ODIN
STATION AI

Played by
CARL LUMBLY

Lumbly is another face you're sure to recognise, but his voice is almost as familiar. Having worked on ***LA Law*, *The X-Files*, *Alias*** (as Marcus Dixon), ***The West Wing*, *The Returned*** and much more. In gaming you can hear him in ***Diablo III*, *Injustice*** as Martian Manhunter, and as Charles Milton Porter in ***BioShock 2: Minerva's Den***.





Played by
SARAH GRAYSON

Sarah is seemingly Fullbright's good luck charm having voiced Sam in ***Gone Home*** and now returning as the lead in ***Tacoma***. She's also added some additional voices to ***Dragon Age: Inquisition*** between these projects, but Fullbright's titles remain her biggest credits to date. Unlike most of the rest of the cast, she recorded her work solo.

"I THINK THAT ALL OF US WANT TO TRY TO DO RIGHT BY THE CHARACTERS AND THE STORY OF THE GAME"





Catching the crew in private moments in their quarters may well give you unexpected insights into their interests and relationships.





Not only can you pick up and look at objects around the station, there are also a lot of real-world items you can play with like throwing darts at this board and playing pool. The physics engine is pretty good.

"We have these characters on-screen, but we want to make exploring these moments in the crew's lives more like an integral part of what you do as a player, not just what you look at as a player," adds Gaynor. "And that influenced how the space, the level design, was built. We realised that we needed more compact, more personal spaces that the crew completely inhabited so that when you're in their space and you can see how their presence in it impacts the environment and vice-versa." So the concept of the entire station being zero-G was left behind to allow for more familiar setups and easier interaction with the scenes. "If you're not in gravity you can't put a bunch of stuff on a table and say 'somebody was eating dinner here'," says Gaynor, chuckling.



WE HAVE THESE CHARACTERS ON-SCREEN, BUT WE WANT TO MAKE EXPLORING THESE MOMENTS IN THE CREW'S LIVES MORE LIKE AN INTEGRAL PART OF WHAT YOU DO AS A PLAYER



Which brings us back to this idea of communicating the story to the player in a way that is both practical and believable in the space, that works in the context of the rules that have been established for what *Tacoma* is. In this respect how you connect to the game world through Amy and the AR interface is another example of smart design choices and iteration delivering an innovative and engaging result. It's something the team spent a lot of time perfecting.

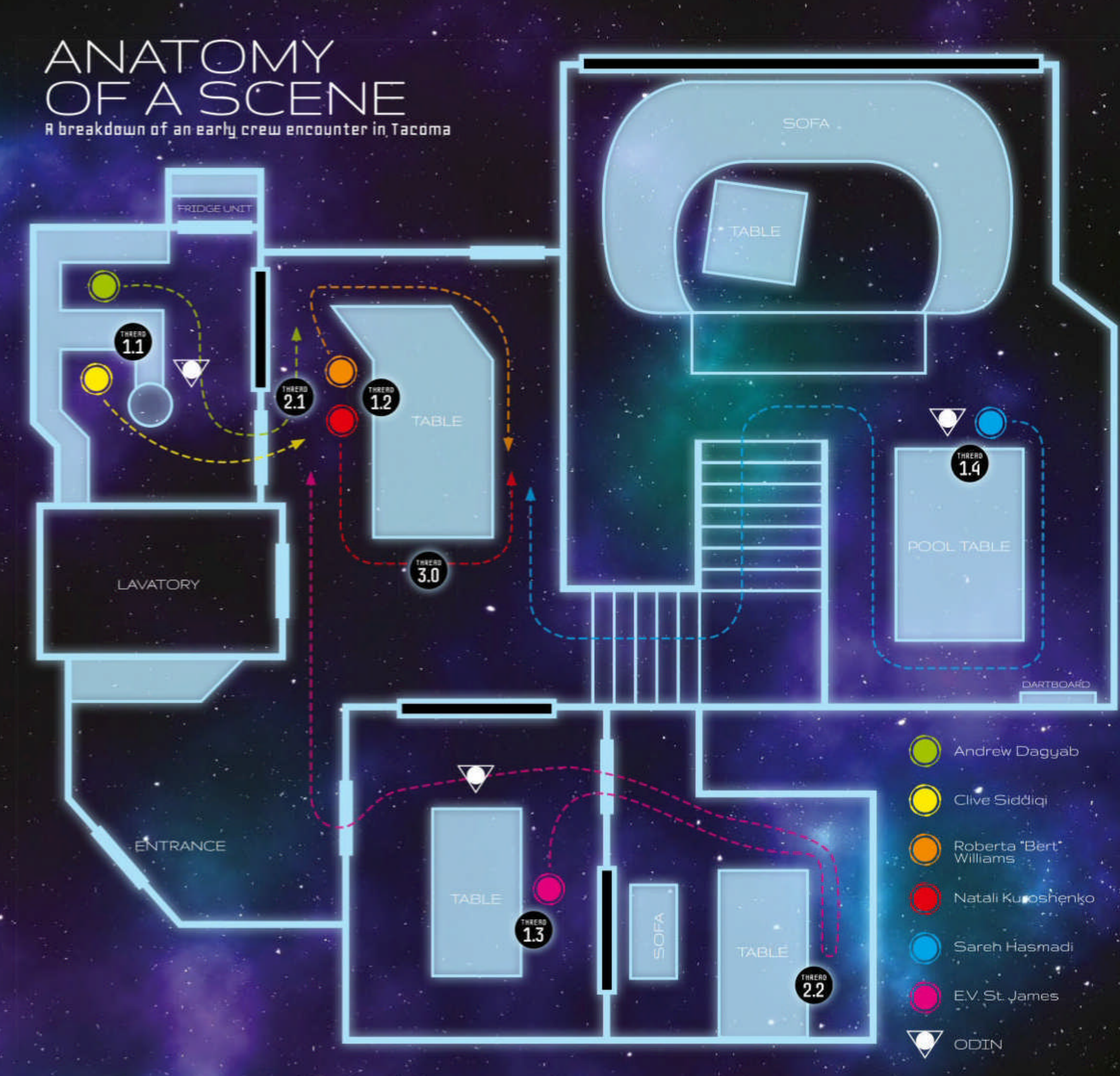
"A lot of the natural assumption for interfaces in games are movie OS," says Zimonja. "Like the 'whishy' stuff from *Minority Report*, moving your arms around to do things, and we really did think you wouldn't actually want to do that in real life." Having committed to the concept of an augmented reality dashboard for both the player character and the crew of the Tacoma, Fullbright set about projecting what modern smartphone interfaces might look like in the future. "I remember one of the first versions of that we did was a bunch of basically square panels totally in front of the player's view, filling up the screen," recalls Freeman. "What if you're just surrounded by windows? Then if you think about how these people are actually using it, they're walking around the station and you see them actually looking at it in the scenes, we were like, 'How are they walking around if they have all these panels in their face?'. So now we have that centre piece that's cut out so they can actually see where they're going." What you will see is a Y shape interface with two branching app icons on either side that open up additional, translucent windows for messages and other data. The same interfaces can be recovered from the crew too as you watch back their actions to see what they were seeing.

And then comes the really sticky bit: making the interface useable for the player and the fictional characters in this world. "Then you have to say, 'Okay, but the actual interface for this is using a mouse or a gamepad to aim a cursor and point at things on a flat screen', so it becomes more of a multivalent design challenge of conceptually how would this work in the fictional world, but how do you actually click on it using the interface?" Gaynor asks laughing. And thanks to the playtests it seems to have paid off. "What's as important as things that people do mention is what people don't mention, and so the fact that people use this interface and just kind of get it and don't even say or mention it, it just means you didn't have to think about it. You saw it and you got how it works. You used it and you're done. I think that that's a good sign that we got to a place that people can use it intuitively in the same way that in the best case an app on your phone has an interface that doesn't need to be explained."

So after some false starts and shifts in direction, but staying true to the original goal of creating a lifelike world with characters you can believe in, Fullbright is finishing up its vision for *Tacoma*. It's a game with its own visual language and sense of storytelling. A game that invites you to not only unravel the mystery of what happened to its crew and the AI that helped to run the station, but to delve deeper into their personal lives and perhaps in so doing reveal a little about your own character too. As we played we were instantly drawn in by the small details, the way the crew laughed together and quizzed each other for details. We loved scrubbing back and forth through the scenes looking for clues or small interactions that we might be able to imitate to reveal new details. But more than anything we began to believe in this space station and be enthralled by its design. For all that we were utterly captivated by *Gone Home*, *Tacoma* is taking the concept into orbit.

ANATOMY OF A SCENE

A breakdown of an early crew encounter in Tacoma



THREAD 1.1

0:00-1:09 In the kitchen, Dagyab and Siddiqi discuss the meaning of Obsolescence Day, what it implies, how it relates to AI and about the cake they are making according to ODIN's instruction, which ODIN confirms are being followed correctly.

THREAD 1.2

0:00-1:09 In the main Administration room, Williams and Kuroshenko talk about the entire team having they contracts renewed for another full year on Tacoma and how unusual that is. They also discuss life back home and what they're looking forward to.

THREAD 1.3

0:00-1:10 In the Conference Room, St. James is recording a report with the assistance of ODIN, presumably to her superiors, on the performance of the Tacoma crew.

THREAD 1.4

0:00-1:10 In the Lounge, Hasmadi is playing pool while talking to ODIN about the nature of friendships and relationships, loneliness and eventually ODIN's experience of these concepts as an AI.

THREAD 2.1

1:09-1:38 Dagyab and Siddiqi bring the cake to the main Administration table, calling the crew to gather around and share.

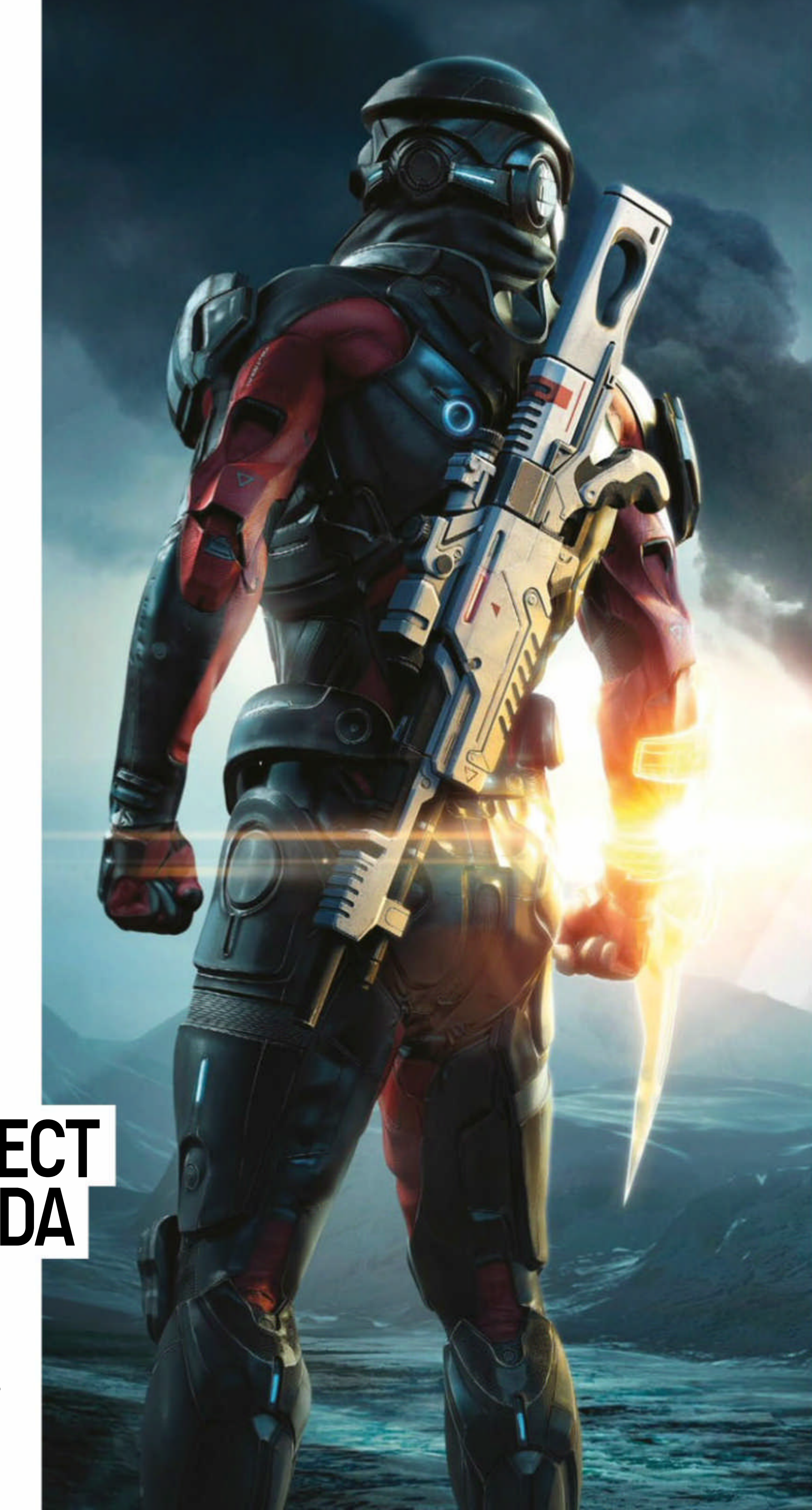
THREAD 2.2

1:10-1:38 St. James leaves the Conference Room to access her private terminal in the Administrator's Office.

THREAD 3.0

1:38-2:28 An explosion happens somewhere on Tacoma. The crew assembles in the main Administration room to find out what's happened, assess damage and discuss options.

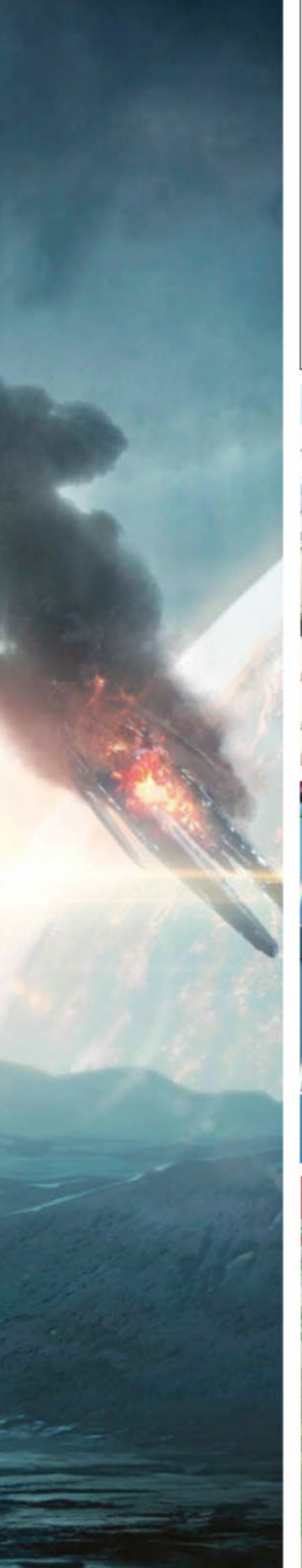
Reviews



70

MASS EFFECT ANDROMEDA

Has BioWare launched a new classic or is this expansion on its premier RPG series in danger of breaking up on re-entry?



THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and, of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest. We'd never let that happen, and besides, you'd smell it a mile off. Finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact. They are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists designed to enlighten, inform and engage – the gospel according to **games™**.













AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right. But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing. Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or did we nail it?

Let us know through the following channels:



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#gamestmiswrong #gamestmisright



AN EXAMPLE OF WHAT CAN OCCUR WHEN AMBITION CLASHES WITH EXECUTION

MULTIPLAYER TESTED

Mass Effect Andromeda, much like its predecessor, features a cooperative multiplayer component that is far better than it has any right to be. It's essentially geared around four players teaming up to battle against waves of enemies for survival and resources that can be brought back into the main game. It's surprisingly engaging, with the third-person combat coming into its own when much of the customisation has been ripped from your hands. While tied to the main campaign, via the APEX Strike Terminal aboard the Tempest, it isn't as intrusive as similar system found in *Mass Effect 3* – which is to say, it can be ignored without having a detrimental effect on overall mission completion or potential end state scenarios. A small victory.





LOST IN TRANSLATION

Mass Effect Andromeda

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PC
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: BioWare
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Left: When it wants to be, *Mass Effect Andromeda* can be a real stunner. Some of the environments look gorgeous, a mad spectacle as you begin to explore these sprawling alien worlds, figuring out their particular ecosystems and cycles.





Left: Games of this size typically have issues with facial animations and lip-syncing, although *Andromeda* takes this to new heights (or should that be lows?) as the game struggles to get through a single conversation without at least one distraction cropping up.

In many ways, *Mass Effect Andromeda* is truly impressive, a testament to the trials and tribulations that many developers face when tackling triple-A videogame design in the modern era. It's an example of what can occur when ambition clashes with execution, or the lack thereof, as is the case in BioWare's latest endeavour. While *Andromeda* has its rare moments of clarity, they are so often punctured by consistent problems surrounding narrative, characterisation, gameplay and technical stability, helping to create what is perhaps BioWare's most uneven RPG to date.

As a studio, BioWare has established itself a legacy wholly focused on creating "rich stories, unforgettable characters and vast worlds to discover", and while *Andromeda* contains 60 hours of stories, characters and worlds the adjectives should, in this instance, be changed to 'sterile', 'lifeless' and 'bland'. *Andromeda* is a wasted opportunity, in turn making *Mass Effect* a shadow of its former self; too beholden to tired ideas and bloated design constructs, hangovers of the last generation, to truly find its own voice.

As you arrive in Andromeda your purpose is made immediately clear: new worlds need to be discovered and colonised, first contact needs to be established with the native species of the galaxy, and conflict will arise from you being some 2.5 million light years away from home. We are the aliens in this galaxy – explorers, not soldiers – as the exhaustive promotional campaign made perfectly clear, and the fate of the humanity is cast in your inexperienced hands. It's an ambitious idea, and a salivating one of that. Sadly, it takes just an hour for the entire concept to fall apart.

First contact is upended by an uncomfortable obsession with first blood, as *Andromeda* immediately forces you into conflict with one of the three new races, the Kett (not to mention, later, hundreds of other disgruntled travellers from the Milky Way), in an effort to showcase its stripped back, fluid third-person combat. From there, it isn't long before you are cast off into a limited array of sparsely-populated areas to explore and renovate, rampaging across a new galaxy and looting anything that once claimed to hold a pulse. You'll become distracted by banal fetch quests, wrestling against an archaic inventory management system and a UI that isn't equipped to deal with the task at hand. Never mind the 20,000 humans under your care, because the Angara need you to locate and retrieve three data pads in an environment that you are apparently more equipped to navigate than the natives themselves.

Imagine, if you will, Captain James T Kirk, abandoning his mission to "explore strange new worlds" in an effort to fill out his pockets with an enviable amount of credit chips, resources and salvage. Forget, for a moment, the mission to seek out new life as he attempts to get Spock into bed through relentless flirting, and don't worry about researching new alien technology, because Scotty needs you to locate popcorn so he can run a movie night on your ship. Issues with tone, mission structure and quest design constantly upend any sense of drama in a game world that should be fraught with a lingering sense of dread and urgency.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

EXPANDED HORIZONS: While it's great making a planet viable enough for habitation, any degree of customisation over it would go a long way to making it feel as if you were having a real impact.

Mass Effect was always a series that was celebrated for its freedom of choice – and for making those choices matter in both the smaller character moments and the larger overarching narrative – but there is very little drama or consequence to be found in *Andromeda*. The scenarios you'll often find yourself in are interesting enough, the banter between a familiar blend of Human, Krogan, Turian and Asari squadmates is as witty as ever, though the broader execution is almost universally poor. It's exasperating, truth be told, to encounter such menial, laborious writing and narrative structuring in a BioWare production in 2017.

It doesn't help that the Paragon/Renegade system, which awarded points for playing nice or nastily with others, has been replaced by a rather flat system. As a dramatic device for letting you feel agency over pivotal moments in the story and conversations, the original system just *worked*. *Andromeda's* equivalent doesn't have the same payoff, with the four tones you are able

to choose between in dialogue always seemingly resulting in similar outcomes. You never feel as if your character is growing or establishing themselves in the world, a crying shame considering the improvements made to both the character customisation and the voice acting of the lead roles.

The narrative does have its moments, however. While it's a far cry from the loyalty missions or Suicide Mission of *Mass Effect 2*, *Andromeda* does offer plenty of opportunities to get to know and love your companions. Once you've trudged through the first 20 hours of the game, the main missions begin to pick up the pace and interest, while a loyalty mission with fellow human squadmate Liam, offers a little brevity and fun in a game so sorely lacking any. Some of the best writing comes in the form of diary entries found in terminals aboard your ship, the Tempest, which can be a breath of fresh air against the inconsistent application of your universal translator, banal comm chatter while out exploring and the soul-crushing interruptions of your AI companion SAM.

That is all to say that *Andromeda* lacks any real internal logic, or at least it fails to adhere to the one it attempts to establish for itself early on. NPCs so routinely fail to respond to shifting parameters in the world, repeating the same tired dialogue time and time again even after you've resolved whatever petty squabble may have been troubling them. Little of what you do seems to have any lasting consequence, threads are left to dangle because of developer oversight or bugs stopping quests dead in their tracks. Characters you encounter seem to forget that you are explorers from another galaxy, ignoring basic struggles in an effort to build tension in a story lacking any real drive.

Much of this feels like a direct result of the influence of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. While the 2014 production was able to settle into a comfortable rhythm of state-building across sprawling playgrounds, *Andromeda* seems to lack cohesive direction. Each hub world you are able to drop down onto is so large that it requires a vehicle to traverse, and a handful can be a genuine delight to explore, but so much of the experience can feel thankless. There's a ton of content in *Andromeda*, but so much of it feels like filler, a checklist of objectives that have little impact on anything outside of 100 per cent completion tracker. It's also upsetting to see so many of the areas populated by lifeless NPCs, holding the same spot, spouting the same dialogue, for over 60 hours – honestly, at times it doesn't feel as if BioWare has come all that far from 2002's *Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic* in this regard.

What has advanced, however, is combat. Despite framing the game around you being explorers, not soldiers, *Andromeda* quickly ensures that you are capable enough to rack up a body count that would make even Commander Shepard wince. Considering the sheer amount of problems surrounding the rest of the game, its design and pacing, it's clear BioWare put a sizeable amount of time and resources into combat. The moment-to-moment gameplay is fast and fluid, a refinement of stripped down core proficiencies seen in *Mass Effect 3*'s multiplayer. That said, it's also repetitive and shallow, a good idea let down by a handful of notable oversights and confusing design decisions.

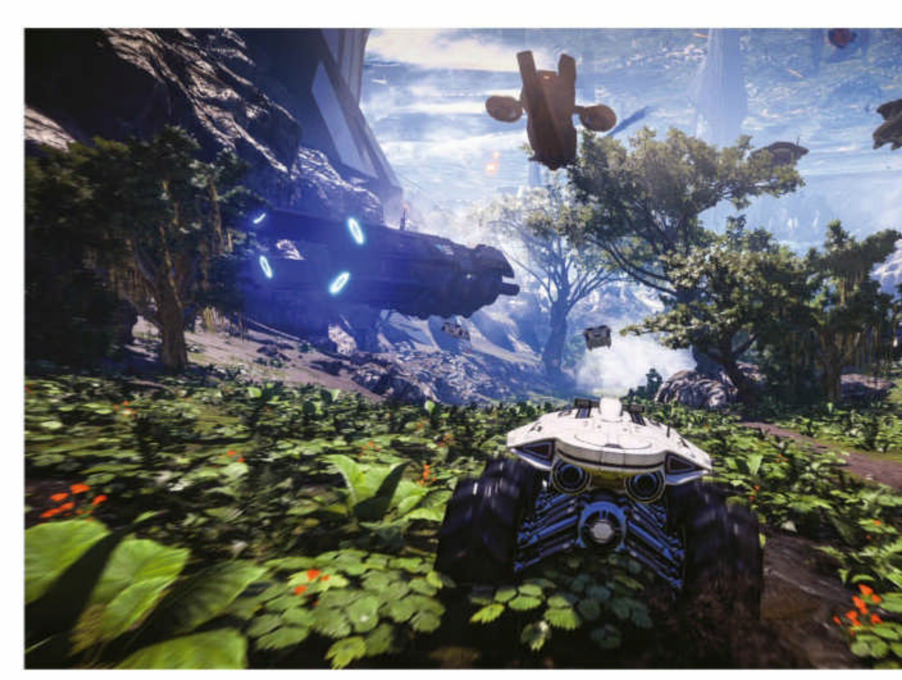
Andromeda wants you to be agile, switching between proficiencies in Combat, Tech and

FAQs

Q. HOW LONG IS THE GAME?
If you want to mop up all of the side-quests and main missions, you should expect *Mass Effect Andromeda* swallow up around 60 hours of your time.

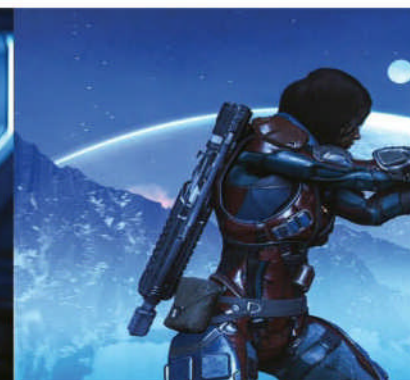
Q. ANY SIGN OF SHEPARD?
Andromeda is set 600 years after the events of *Mass Effect 2*, so you shouldn't expect to see any familiar faces or characters from the original trilogy returning.

Q. HOW'S THE ENDING?
Erm, spoilers! It won't be as contentious as the *Mass Effect 3* ending, but it leaves room for more adventures, despite being rather disappointing.



Right: If you can get over the 20-hour hump, much like in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, then you'll find a game much improved, although still disappointing. BioWare has front-loaded many of *Andromeda*'s most boring missions and ideas.

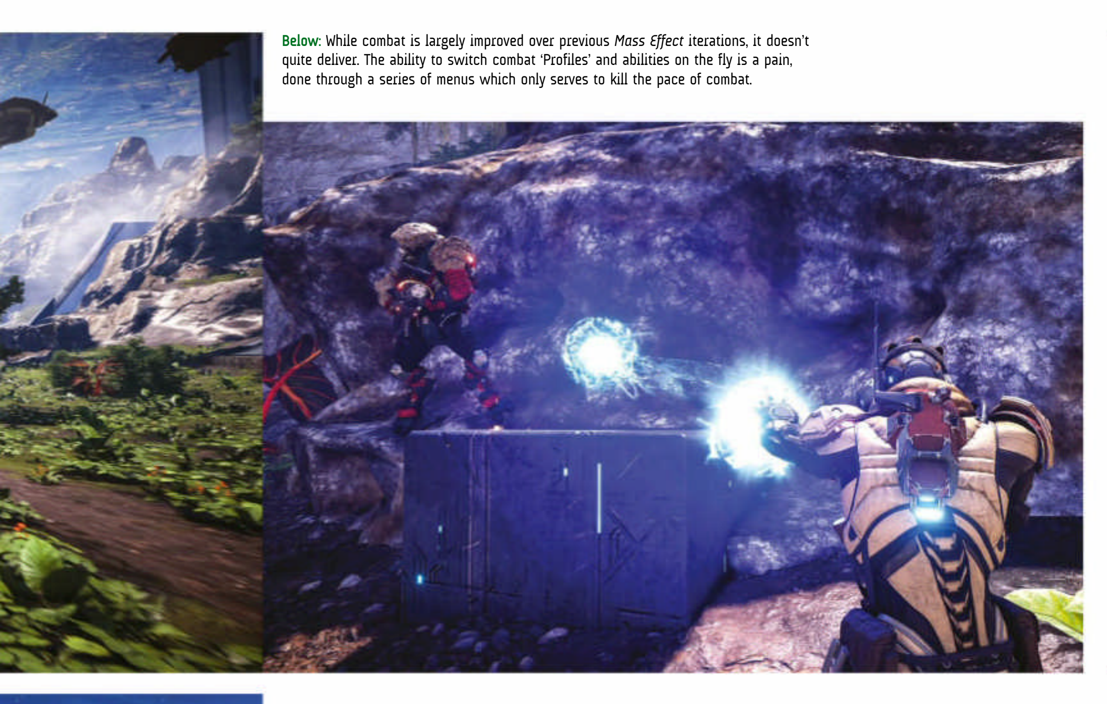




Above: Many of the smaller, quieter character moments are the real highlight of *Andromeda*. You'll quickly come to appreciate each of your new squadmates.
Left: In terms of content, *Andromeda* is absolutely packed. It's just a shame that so much of it is uninteresting, making the game often feel directionless.

MICROMANAGING COMBAT IS SLOW AND CUMBERSOME, ACTIVELY DISCOURAGING THE USE OF MANY NEW GAMEPLAY SYSTEMS

Below: While combat is largely improved over previous *Mass Effect* iterations, it doesn't quite deliver. The ability to switch combat 'Profiles' and abilities on the fly is a pain, done through a series of menus which only serves to kill the pace of combat.



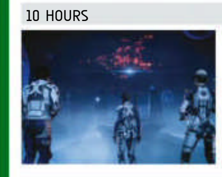
TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE KEY BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

60 MINS

Okay, maybe this new *Mass Effect* will be alright. The environments look gorgeous, characters seem fun and we're in a whole new galaxy! Good times are surely ahead.

10 HOURS



Whoever it was that decided old Remnant technology would be unlocked by completing space Soduku puzzles is a very bad person. Nothing kills momentum like a Sodoku puzzle.

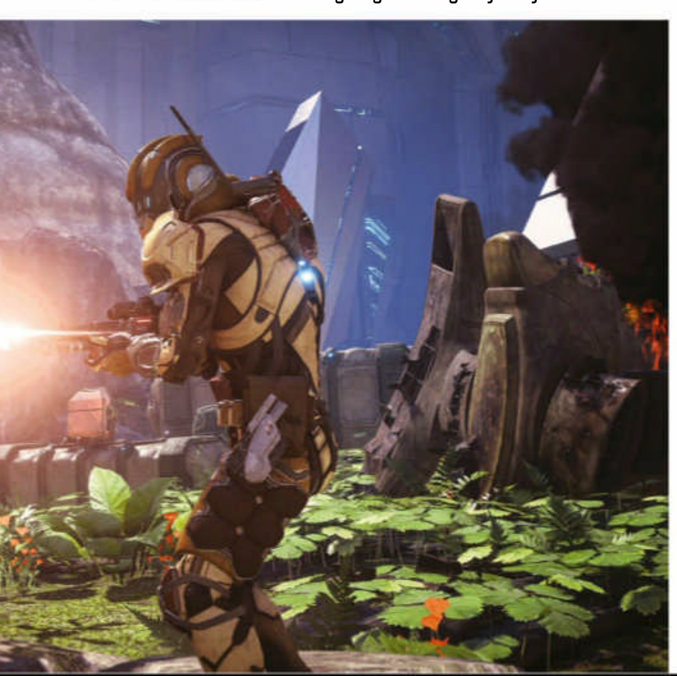
3 DAYS



We've seen all that there is to see here, and despite moments of promise, this doesn't feel like the *Mass Effect* game we've spent so many years waiting to play.

A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY

Despite being swept off to a new galaxy, you will spend most of your time surrounded by familiar faces. The Salarians, Krogans, Turians and Asari have all come along for the ride and constantly remind you of two things: firstly, some of *Mass Effect*'s most interesting species have been left behind and, secondly, *Andromeda* doesn't do a good enough job of establishing a new line of races to engage with. While Jaal, a squadmate of Angaran heritage, will eventually join your mission, it doesn't feel as if the game does a good enough job of refreshing the series, so many of the main stories and engagements feel beholden to old conflicts and infightings from a galaxy away.



Biotics at will, darting between predefined Profiles to better match any threat in battle. The problems here begin with your loadout. You can only change your gear when you're at a Loadout Station, meaning you're stuck with whatever gear you brought out into the field until you can find another one, even if you have a more suitable weapon sat in your inventory. The problems then extend to the Profiles themselves. Flipping between each requires rifling through a litany of menus. This is also the case for abilities; you can only equip three abilities at any one time, changing them again requires diving into menus, making the removal of the power wheel feels like a baffling decision. Couple all of this with limited squad control, making it impossible to reliably perform combos or manage tactical proficiency in engagements, and suddenly you are having to lean on the lacklustre AI to assist you – which it will rarely do convincingly.

Micromanaging combat is slow and cumbersome, actively discouraging the use of many new gameplay systems that BioWare clearly wants you to pay attention to. The frustrations don't end there, however. Planet scanning makes a return, and it's still a giant time-sinking waste of time. Navigating the galaxy map is a nightmare, taking between 10-30 seconds to move from point of interest to point of interest. And then there are the technical problems – and they are far worse than the infamous facial animations.

WORLDWIDE

TAKING GAMING ONLINE

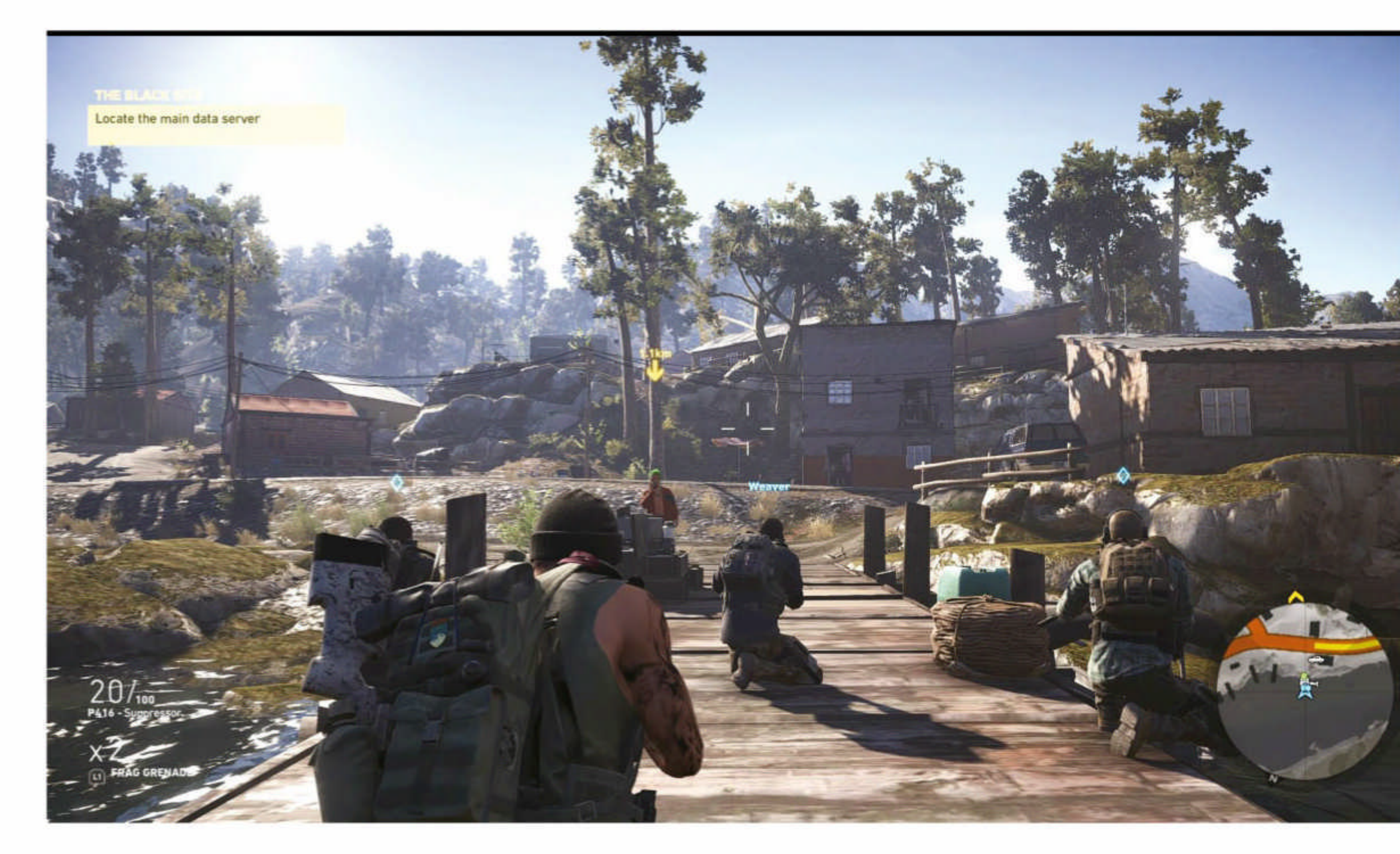
ONLINE ACTION: Despite some server stability issues, the multiplayer is a welcomed distraction to the main game, giving you a break from the loop of fetch quests.

While *Inquisition* worked fine on Frostbite, *Mass Effect* has struggled with the shift. The Xbox One version of the game has, in particular, a number of issues that heavily impact playability. Even after the day-one patch, *Andromeda*'s frame-rate will fall to half-speed in combat, crawling as you attempt to navigate cover, fight bullet-sponge enemies and account for the fact that your companions have glitched through the environment. Texture pop-in, characters disappearing, enemies appearing in midair, dialogue clips that don't play and game crashes are all to be expected throughout your time with *Andromeda*. Also expect to find bugs that corrupt data and make life in the new galaxy miserable. It's ridiculous that the game has made it to shelves in this state; BioWare games have never been perfect, a few bugs and inconsistencies are to be expected in games with this wide of a scope, but this is something else entirely.

Andromeda is far removed from what made the *Mass Effect* games great to begin with that it feels like a shadow of its former self, an IP struggling to match the bar set by its contemporaries, created by a studio struggling to beat the spectre of expectation and hype. *Andromeda* has its moments, as rare as they might be, but the overall package feels a long way aways from where it needs to be.

VERDICT 5/10

A NEW LOW FOR THE MASS EFFECT SERIES



BORN TO BE MILD

Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Wildlands

'Press R3 to knock out' reads the text prompt, one of the first of many tutorial prompts you'll get throughout *Wildlands.* It's that done-to-death situation, you've seen a thousand times before, where there's a guard facing away from you and unless you run out in front of him, he'll never turn around. He is there to teach you the same lesson every other game has told you – this is how to do a stealth.

You've done this before. In fact, you've done a lot of this stuff before. Ubisoft has taken the open world game and over the past few years refined it and then subsequently ground it down into a dull nub. For every *Far Cry 2*, brave and uncompromising, there's an *Assassin's Creed 3*, bloated and tedious. The open world game seems to be the current dial-a-game formula – remember when everyone had a *WOW* clone, or a *Gears Of War*-alike – and it's the turn of the *Tom Clancy* licence to have its particular brand of military action painted all over it.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Paris
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4 Online
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Bolivia provides the backdrop for the Ghosts to go about their business, with crime boss Él Sueño basically buying the country off and turning it into a narco state. Sent in to destabilise his operation by taking out his generals, before eliminating the big man himself, the Ghosts have to use the internal conflict within the country between the military and a rebel group to their advantage and pick away at the criminal hierarchy. So far, so *Crackdown* meets *Narcos*.

It's quite similar to Pandemic's *Mercenaries* games, a big map full of enemy settlements and, really, not much else. There's a few small villages and a couple of landmarks, but none have any impact on the gameplay – they're just there. Ubisoft's Bolivia is boiled down to a bunch of winding roads and people with accents to shoot at. The scale might be genuinely impressive and there's a fair bit of variety throughout, from salt flats to deep forest, but it's a vast ocean that's about as deep as a puddle.

WE'RE PRETTY SURE EVEN SUPERMAN 64 WOULD BE MARGINALLY BETTER IF IT HAD A CO-OP CAMPAIGN

Before long, as is the case with these games, that map is full of symbols that indicate all sorts of side missions, objectives and other things that you can do to supplement the main thread through the narrative. It's hardly wetwork, though – it's busywork. The main story missions – especially the assaults on the cartel bosses – are all decent, clearly areas where the most work has gone in, but all of the secondary stuff is simply the generic objectives you've seen in other games countless times. Steal this vehicle. Clear these enemies. Race between the two points. Yawn.

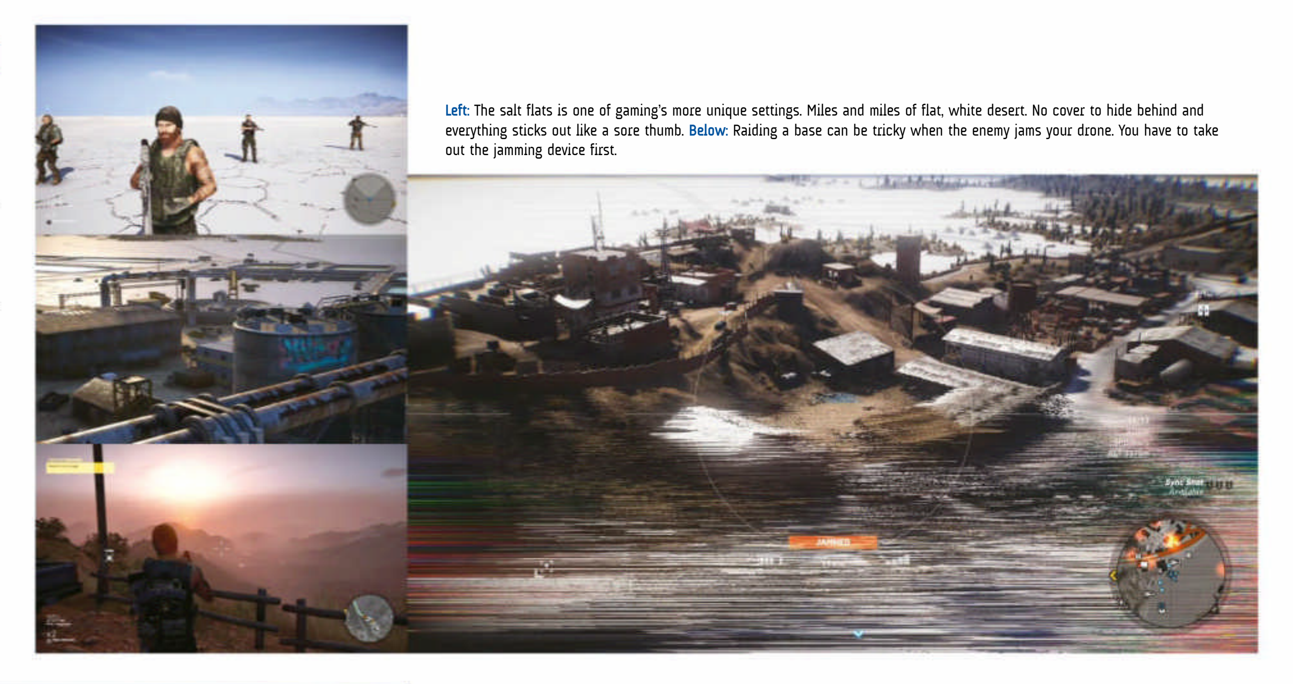
The strangest addition to the game is the 'Sync Shot', which allows you to mark targets

FAQs

Q. WHAT ARE THE MULTIPLAYER MODES?
There's only the one. You're either playing the campaign online with up to four others, or you're playing alone.

Q. WHAT CAN I CUSTOMISE?
A fair bit. Your character's outfit can be tweaked and guns can have loads of components added to them.

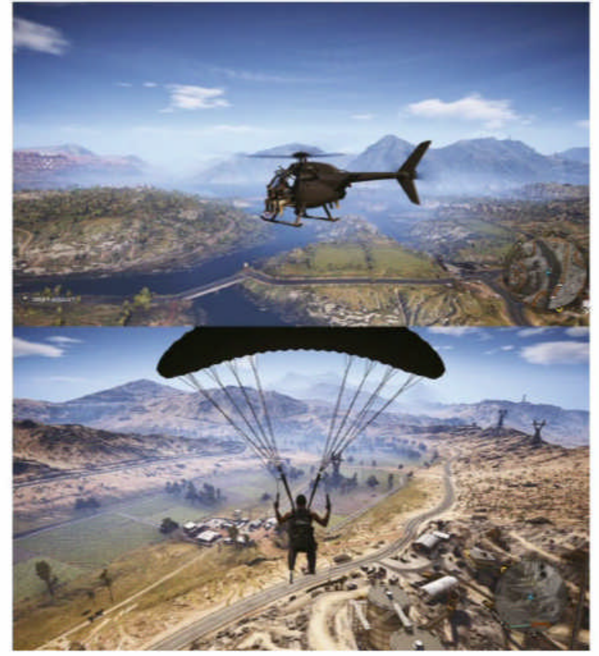
Q. HOW ARE THE MISSIONS?
Every standard open world mission type is on offer! Race thing. Shoot thing. Defend thing. Tiring.



Right: In stills, when there's no floating guns or enemies getting stuck in walls/vehicles, it can be quite a striking game, visually. A nice sunset really impresses before a raid.

Below: The scale of the map is intimidatingly large, even when taking a helicopter it will take you a good 15 minutes or so to fly from corner to corner.

Left: The salt flats is one of gaming's more unique settings. Miles and miles of flat, white desert. No cover to hide behind and everything sticks out like a sore thumb. **Below:** Raiding a base can be tricky when the enemy jams your drone. You have to take out the jamming device first.



by scope or by using a drone and then, after your team has 'verified' the targets, you can deliver an execute command that takes out all mark enemies simultaneously. Hilariously, it varies whether there is any limitation on the marking. Sometimes your AI partners will not find their targets, no matter how clear the shot is, and sometimes, for example, you can be sat outside of an enemy fortress, surrounded by walls, use the drone to mark two soldiers inside two separate buildings and then, using what can only be described as 'magic bullets', cause those two soldiers to suddenly drop dead. There's a cooldown on using this, sure, but with some patience you can almost completely negate the difficulty of the game entirely.

The AI is truly terrible, specifically when handling squadmates. They seem to have mastered the art of teleportation, able to shift time and space at their whim. They'll occasionally forget to follow you into combat, only to appear by magic into the middle of a firefight. They'll travel through concrete, across mountain ranges and despite this, are rarely where you ever want them to be.

Co-operative mode is where the game is at its best. Shedding the AI teammates and also, the insta-win situation that the sync shot provides is gone, and this allows for a more tactical experience, built on doing plenty of pre-assault set-up on enemy positions – sending a drone up marks soldiers on everyone's HUD and those combination shots have to be communicated and performed by all involved players, rather than a simple button prompt.

Suddenly, it's a different game. Objectives become more varied as that all-important human element means that there's more adapting to emergent situations – like an idiot friend getting caught sneaking where he shouldn't and an almighty firefight breaking out – and suddenly *Wildlands* starts to live up to the concept's promise. A touch of *Far Cry*, a sprinkling of *Metal Gear Solid V*, only all of it playable with friends.

Of course this means that you need three same-format-owning friends, each armed with their copy of the game and the free time needed just to get the most out of *Ghost Recon Wildlands*. Not unreasonable, by any stretch of the imagination, but absolutely worth noting if you're planning on diving into this game as a solo endeavour. Saying that, pretty sure even *Superman 64* would be marginally better if it had a co-op campaign. It's quite amazing how much the single-player experience has been compromised in favour of the online co-op.

Wildlands exists in this weird space where the genre it is part of has been done to death, so it's either got to be a cracking example of all the cliché parts (as seen in *Horizon Zero Dawn*) or absolutely reinvent the bloody wheel (like in *Zelda: BOTW*). It does neither, and what it does do, it doesn't do particularly well.

MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

GIVE US SKILLS: Most open world games get exponentially better the more choice you have, so it's quite frustrating to see the best stuff gated behind a skill tree. Get that into the player's hands ASAP.

MILITARY INTELLIGENCE

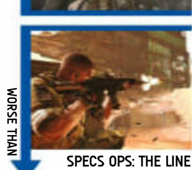
One of the better parts of *Wildlands* is the amount of ways you can approach an enemy settlement. Call on the local rebel faction you've wooed to drop mortars or provide a distraction, or maybe use an armed drone, equipped with night vision, to swoop around picking off unsuspecting guards? Perhaps sneak in and take out everyone with a silenced pistol, moving from cover to cover while a sniper watches over you? Or, of course, you can go in all guns – and there's a lot of guns – blazing. Most of the more entertaining stuff needs unlocking, so expect to put in some time before you have some real choice in combat situations.

BETTER THAN



ROGUE WARRIOR

WORSE THAN



SPECS OPS: THE LINE

VERDICT 5/10
A BUGGY, UNINSPIRING AND FORMULAIC SHOOTER.

THE ONLY THIEVES WE'LL WELCOME

Persona 5

For a game that's themed around thievery, *Persona 5* hasn't plundered much from the games that have come and gone since the release of *Persona 4* back in 2008. If you've played either the third or fourth game in the series, you'll be right at home here as many of the systems and themes have been carried over to this new instalment. Having said that, *Persona 4* is regarded as one of the greatest RPGs to come from Japan, so that's no bad thing – and there are definitely improvements on show in its sequel, though these are evolutionary rather than revolutionary.

When you think of Tokyo, 'slow' is one of the least likely adjectives to spring to mind to describe it – and that's true of *Persona 5*, which is set in Japan's capital. Its predecessor was set in a sleepy rural town and the game was happy to let you sink into that setting slowly (in fact, it was a couple of hours before you got to do anything of note). The pacing in *Persona 5* is far better on that front – you're immediately thrust into action, performing a daring, but ultimately bungled, raid that winds up with your protagonist undergoing a punishing interrogation, before the non-linear narrative flashes back to fully establish your character and motivations. As you become more acquainted with the game, you'll learn that your protagonist and his associates, the Phantom Thieves, are rebellious spirits – fed up with being outsiders in society, they seek to expose the wrongdoings of the powerful people around them.

In practice, what that means is entering mental 'palaces' created by the Phantom Thieves' targets, which reveal their inner perception of reality – for example, the initial target is a schoolteacher who sees himself as a king and the school as his castle. These dungeons are a major improvement on those seen in *Persona 4*, as they've been fully designed as opposed to being procedurally generated from a selection of premade parts. As well as giving the locations more character, this allows for greater implementation of puzzles – the thieves will often find guarded items they must access, or need to work their way around dead ends.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PS3
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Deep Silver
DEVELOPER: Atlus
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Right: We've come to expect excellent presentation from the *Persona* series, and *Persona 5* delivers on that front. Close-up illustrations of character faces punctuate important moments both in regular conversations and occasionally even during battle scenes.

FAQs

Q. DO OLD CHARACTERS RETURN?
No – as usual it's a new cast of characters, though *Persona 4* characters are alluded to.

Q. HOW ABOUT SHUFFLE TIME?
All of the card stuff is gone, making All-Out Attack finishes less important.

Q. ARE JAPANESE VOICES INCLUDED?
They're not in the main game, but will be released as free DLC.



YOU'LL OFTEN MEET SKETCHY CHARACTERS, WHILE BEING MADE CONSTANTLY AWARE THAT YOU'RE JUST AS SUSPICIOUS AS THEY ARE

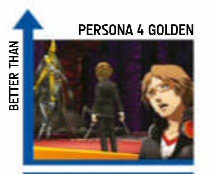




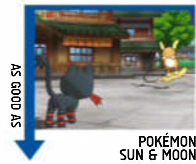
Above: Animated cutscenes are employed during the most important storyline events, and have been produced to a high standard.

BETTER THAN

PERSONA 4 GOLDEN







AS GOOD AS

POKÉMON SUN & MOON



GETTING CRAFTY

One interesting aspect of the game is the ability to create infiltration tools, which often take the place of items found in previous games. For example, locked treasure chests must now be opened with lockpicks instead of randomly found keys, and the quick dungeon escape item Goho-M is crafted rather than bought. This fits in nicely with the thievery theme, but there is one drawback for new players.

Like many other activities in *Persona 5*, crafting infiltration tools passes time, but you're also limited by your proficiency. This means that in the early going, ill-prepared players may find themselves short of necessary items – luckily, it's easier to get out of dungeons thanks to the many safe rooms dotted around within.

This also allows for the introduction of a stealth element. Rather than the dumbly roaming enemies seen in the previous game, *Persona 5*'s enemies will patrol areas and only break rank when an intruder is spotted. Allowing yourself to be caught like this too often will put your enemies on alert, and make progress harder, while successfully ambushing enemies will lower the security.

Once you're in battle, the turn-based combat is broadly the same as in previous games, with a few notable exceptions. Each character is now equipped with a gun of some kind, a secondary physical attack that enemies can hold weakness or resistance to in the same way as they do with elemental magic. Unlike regular attacks, usage of guns is limited by ammunition, which isn't easily replenished. Additionally, while hitting an enemy's weak point still grants an extra attack, you can now use the 'Baton Pass' ability to allow another member of the team to take the opportunity, which boosts their stats in the process. It's a nice piece of flexibility that we greatly appreciate.

However, the biggest addition is the 'Hold Up' – a state entered when all enemies have been knocked down but not killed. You can choose to perform an All-Out Attack, but it's also possible to use this opportunity to speak with your enemies, a mechanic not seen in the series since the days of *Persona 2*. By doing so, you can request items, money or negotiate to bring them to your side as new personas. Of course, they can take some persuading, but the rewards are well worth it. This is definitely a welcome return for one of the mechanics beloved by older fans of the series.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

DUNGEONS: Maps and fast travel make navigation far less of a chore.

COMBAT: Menus have been refined so that most actions are tied to single buttons.

Long-time *Persona* fans who didn't appreciate the bright and breezy feel of *Persona 4* will also be pleased to know that things are a bit more grim here. The Velvet Room is a prison, and the personas you fuse there are executed in a variety of ways. You'll often meet sketchy characters, while being made constantly aware that you're just as suspicious as they are. Even character awakenings are on the dark side, while not quite so graphic as the Evoker scenes in *Persona 3*, with bloodied faces remaining after the masks fused to them are ripped off.

Where the game does lighten up is in the day-to-day activities you undertake as a high school student. The series' signature Social Link system is back, meaning you'll form friendships with a variety of other characters that strengthen your personas, and you'll also take on part-time jobs and other activities to earn money and build core characteristics such as charm, kindness and intelligence. This aspect of the game hasn't moved on so much from *Persona 4*, except where visuals are concerned – the new engine allows for much more interesting cutscenes than in the previous game, though we get the feeling that it could have looked even nicer had there not been the need to develop a last-gen version.

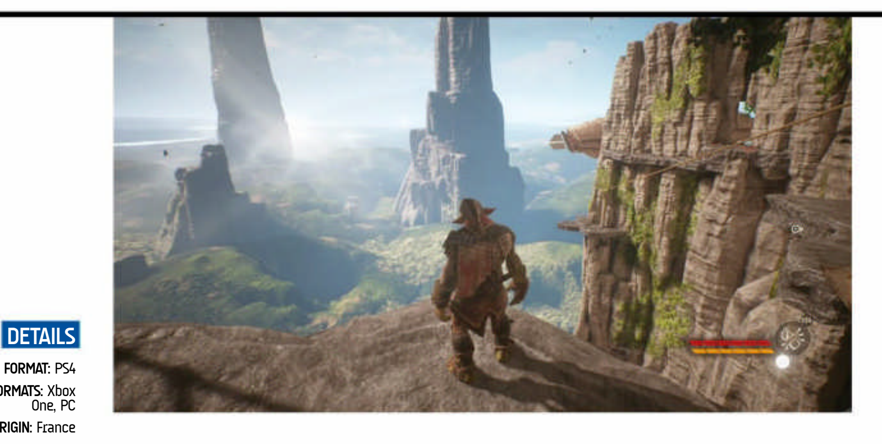
So while *Persona 5* doesn't make huge strides from its predecessor, it's fair to say that it didn't really need to – the improvements here add to an already fantastic game design template, adding interesting dungeons and extra battle complexity to the established formula of deep character interaction and excellent presentation. Ultimately, the rest of the Japanese RPG genre is still playing catch-up.

VERDICT 9/10

IT'S STOLEN OUR HEARTS

WILL STYX EVER BE A MASTER OF SHADOWS?

Styx: Shards Of Darkness



When it comes to the sneaky world of virtual stealth, it's easy to imagine the genre has already reached its pinnacle with the likes of *Metal Gear Solid V* and *Dishonored 2*. So with Snake and Corvo having set the furtive bar so high, is there really a place for a foul-mouthed goblin with a drug addiction?

Styx: Shards Of Darkness – the sequel to 2014's promising yet ever-so-slightly broken *Master Of Shadows* – certainly isn't the best stealth game you'll ever play, but that doesn't mean it won't tickle that covert-shaped itch. Developer Cyanide Studio has clearly learned a thing or two from its inconsistent first attempt and the result is a sneaking simulator with bags of personality and a sprinkling of potential (albeit, one that struggles to know how to use it). Those all-important stealth mechanics no longer feel unpredictable and there's far less clipping on ledges or obstacles, so you can sneak about *SOD*'s impressively vast levels without fear of being detected via glitch

The game's upgrade to *Unreal Engine 4* makes a big difference, too. Mission sandboxes are now broader and more vertical, with Cyanide embracing a broader approach to how they facilitate player agency.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Focus Home Interactive
DEVELOPER: Cyanide Studio
PRICE: £32.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

STYX: MASTER OF SHADOWS



WORSE THAN



METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN

Practically every room and chamber has multiple points of access so you can choose to climb up the walls and navigate above the rafters or sneak in through bolt holes and swoop from table to table.

The emphasis is still on a *Thief*-esque stealth rather than combat, and, with a new skill tree offering upgrades based on XP collected from completed objectives, there's now a bigger focus on seeking out hidden missions. Yet with a greater onus on exploration it's bizarre that the developer didn't go the whole hog and embed each mission with loot and armour, rather than myriad resources and a single collectible type. There's also a new medal system that tracks speed, lethality and alerts and awards you XP, but even that really doesn't suit a game primarily designed for slow, protracted experimentation over large areas.

SOD certainly looks prettier than its ugly sister of a predecessor, but it's held back by a frustratingly mundane colour palette and way too many boring caves to navigate. It's a frustrating dichotomy when you get to traverse a fully-explorable airship or a shanty town, but then you're right back to another drab, washed out cave. It's indicative of the problem that holds *SOD* back – there are great ideas at work (the improvements to Styx's goblin skills, such as the upgraded cloning ability is one such nice touch), but it's core gameplay still feels painfully dated.

CONNECTED

EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

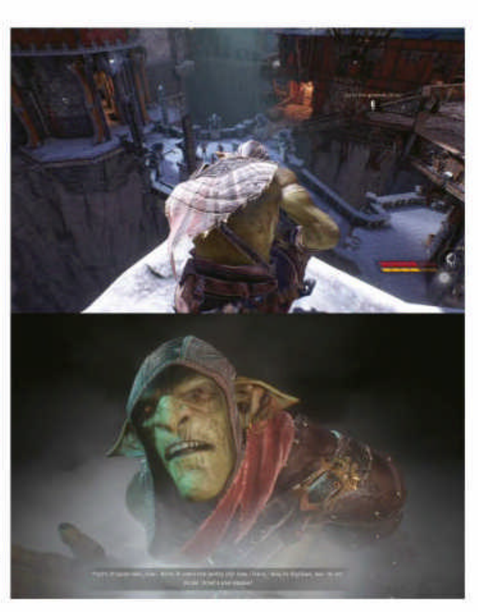
GOBLIN DUO – Co-op makes its debut in the series, offering drop in/drop out gameplay across the entire campaign. We just wish there were more puzzles and obstacles to justify such an addition.

Much like Rebellion's *Sniper Elite* series, *SOD* is a double-A affair with dreams of triple-A stardom. Its stealth sandboxes are teeming with navigational freedom and side shenanigans, but where *SE4* shows a series finally maturing its mechanics, Styx has a long way to sneak before it's earned its place in the clandestine pantheon.



A DATED YET ENJOYABLE STEALTH AFFAIR





Above: *SOD* aims to shake up the *Styx* mix by throwing in some additional puzzles and the occasional boss fight. The puzzles are a cute distraction, but they're far too easy to solve and the boss fights ultimately end up relying more on *SOD*'s floaty platform physics than stealth.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Camelot Software Planning, Bandai Namco Entertainment
PRICE: £27.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

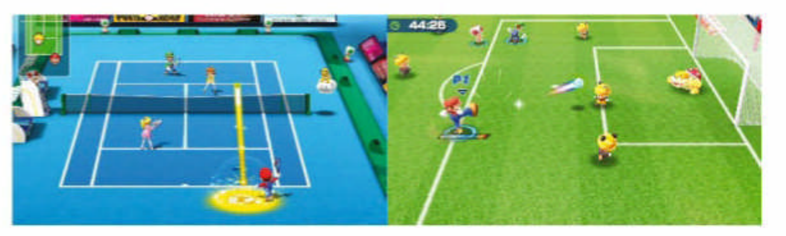
BETTER THAN: MARIO TENNIS: ULTRA SMASH
WORSE THAN: MARIO KART 7

A MIXED BAG OF A MIX TAPE

Mario Sports Superstars

Five *Mario* sporting outings in one package? It sounds like the kind of situation where we are going to get stiffed on the final quality of each of the sports, doesn't it? A classic case of breadth and not depth. It seems like it will have all of the *Mario* polish, but none of sports sims will really be worth a damn. Thankfully, what Nintendo has actually done is deliver a pretty full-blooded version of its take on Tennis, Football, Baseball Golf and Horse Racing. Unfortunately, though, in some instances even its best take on those sports is still pretty poor.

Let's concentrate on the positives of *Mario Sports Superstars* for a moment and say that the Baseball and Golf stood out as particularly solid outings. Both have been well tested in the past, of course. Golf, as it turns out, is a pretty hard genre to mess up. Classic power-up meters, a little spin and wind reading and you've pretty much got it covered. Baseball, with the aid of the 3DS' signature screen feature, is one of the best arcade versions of the sport we've played in recent memory. It makes reading the flight of the ball much easier.



Above: Horse racing stands out like a bit of a sore thumb in this collection. We have to imagine there's a reason why it's included, but we didn't really want to spend too much time pondering it. It's unlikely to be worth the effort.

However, that leaves Football, Tennis and Horse Racing. Football is just lightweight and pedestrian. It's no different from the game available in the *Rio Olympics* titles and that wasn't much better. Tennis is better than the Wii U game we played a while back, but it's still too obsessed with power-ups. It asks for a little more skill to use them now, but it's a hectic mess. And Horse Racing, we imagine someone thought this was a good idea, but we found it slow and frankly going around in circuits with *Mario* characters just made us want to play *Mario Kart*. Which we did. It's a very good game, you should check it out.

So, there's a mixed bag in terms of the final quality of each sport, but if the options in terms of single-player and multiplayer offered something that would offset the balance. Alas, it's a pretty shallow offering with a few cups per sport. It's enjoyable enough, but nothing to get too excited by.



VERDICT 6/10
A NICE COLLECTION, BUT NOTHING EXCELS

SHIN'EN DOES WHAT NINTENDON'T

Fast RMX

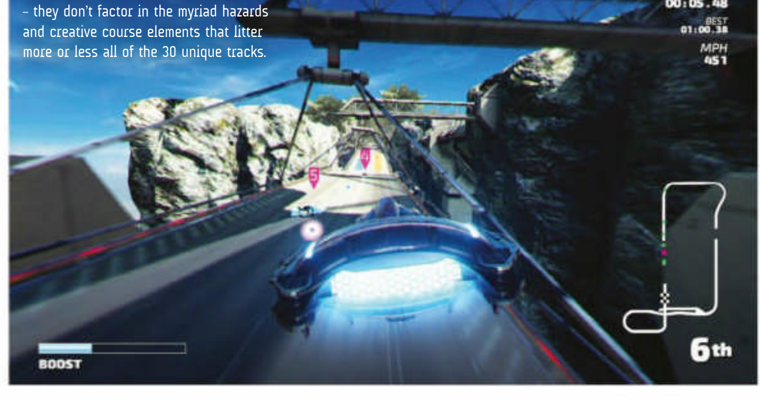
There's seldom a better showcase for a new handheld than a flashy racing game. *Ridge Racer* blew us away when we first saw it running on PSP, *WipEout 2048* did the same on Vita and while Switch isn't strictly a handheld, we got the same kind of thrill from seeing the slick and stylish *Fast RMX* pelt along at 60fps in portable mode here.

It's a game that sits squarely between *F-Zero* and *WipEout*, blending the genuine future motorsport feel of the latter with the arcade handling and presentation of the former and doing so to great effect. And while it's a clear homage that occasionally veers a little too close to blatant – one course is an almost beat-for-beat retread of *F-Zero GX*'s Fire Field, the tubular course familiar down to the undulating sections, scattered boost pads and deadly pylons – it still has its own ideas that help it to carve its own niche in what is a practically competitor-less field.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Switch
OTHER FORMATS: Japan
PUBLISHER: Shin'en Multimedia
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £16.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes





Track maps often appear deceptively simple – they don't factor in the myriad hazards and creative course elements that litter more or less all of the 30 unique tracks.

Chief among these is the polarity system, with a button to switch between blue and orange boost modes and various environmental features that reward colour-matching on the fly. These fare better when optional than when mandatory – particularly in quicker speed classes – but between these elements and a camera that lets the ship leave the usual middle-of-the-screen slot when navigating uneven terrain (confusing at first, but something you quickly come to accept and even appreciate), it's impossible to say *Fast RMX* doesn't manage to feel like its own original game while it channels the genre titans.

It could do without the excitable announcer (who sounds like he fell off an EA Trax soundtrack circa 2003), and would benefit from a few more modes – there's no option to play tracks individually, only as three-race championships in regular or Hero mode, where boost doubles as health a la modern *F-Zero*. But even so, *Fast RMX* is the definitive version of a superb futuristic racer, a fine showcase for Switch's power and a game that offers both exceptional value for money and the kind of racer nobody else seems to want to make these days.



VERDICT 8/10
CAPTAIN FALCON WOULD APPROVE

OUR NIEREST AND DEAREST

Nier: Automata

Director Yoko Taro has remained in relative obscurity, despite having worked at several large games companies in publishers. However *Nier: Automata* is much more than the sum of the collaboration between this quirky director and action game creators PlatinumGames. Combining the style of PlatinumGames' hallmark action with the creativity and sheer weirdness of Yoko Taro's direction and story, what we're left with is a game that feels like it only exists in the mind of a forum-dweller's dreams.

We kicked off *Nier: Automata* being introduced to two principal characters, the androids 2B and 9S, who are part of an android unit embroiled in a war with machines that has raged on for thousands of years. Once we were let out into the world, we found Earth a ruined shell of what it used to be. Buildings have fallen, wildlife is reclaiming the world and dominating once again. We were not only treated to post-apocalyptic cities, but also abandoned amusement parks and forests. The game always switches up its locations to feel fresh and new at all times.

Combat is a standard PlatinumGames combat affair – meaning slick, smooth combo-based combat, with diverse weapon variation and upgrades system that allow for some brilliantly challenging combat scenarios. Where *Nier: Automata* differentiates itself from so many other similar action games is not its open-world structure, but the fact that it likes to change genre pretty often. Sometimes it shifts and becomes a side-scrolling platformer, other times it switches to a bullet-hell shooter. These transitions in gameplay styles are slick, never frustrating and are all executed excellently, thanks to Platinum's backbone of great combat design and RPG elements.

In addition to this, you're also able to upgrade your character's abilities by buying plug-in chips, which let you gain access to more skills, some of which change combat pretty drastically. You can not only upgrade

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Square-Enix
DEVELOPER: PlatinumGames
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Below: Areas of *Nier: Automata* look beautiful, with the Amusement Park being just one example of an area that we don't often see tackled in videogames. It's a joy to explore for the first time.

FAQs

Q. HOW BIG IS THE WORLD?
The open world isn't gigantic, but the tight design makes it great to explore.

Q. IS IT HARD?
Nier: Automata is never challenging on the 'normal' modes – especially for seasoned action game veterans.

Q. ARE THERE ANY MINIGAMES?
You're able to catch fish, ride upon the backs of animals and fight against a robotic kung-fu master. Rest assured, there's a lot to do.

SOMETIMES IT SHIFTS AND BECOMES A SIDE-SCROLLING PLATFORMER, OTHER TIMES IT SWITCHES TO A BULLET-HELL SHOOTER



Below: You might not fully understand the motivations of the villains the first time around, and it is well worth getting to the 'true' ending.



Left: Dodging the complex patterns of projectiles may look intimidating, but keep a cool head and you'll find a through the storm.
Above: Shifting genres mid-game may seem extreme, but it works within the constraints of the game. It keeps gameplay fresh, dynamic and exciting, and always takes you by surprise.

your character but also undertake side quests, which are unfortunately populated by boring fetch errands that have you trekking across the map. The silver lining, however, is that side quests allow you to gain more of an insight into *Nier: Automata*'s world.

The star of the show in *Nier: Automata* is it's narrative and world-design. With Platinum's combat as its backbone, we see the full scope of the game come into its own through into its own by subverting the usual use of gameplay systems. Little things like the UI or Pause screen can be manipulated beyond the player's control – and it all makes sense within the game's world. Additionally, we further see the narrative of the game come to the forefront in an incredibly interesting way.

Playing through *Nier: Automata* once will not get you the full picture, boasting 26 endings, the game likes to play with your expectations, and makes itself fun and exciting even 40 hours in. Each of these completed games will lead to a new game, which shares elements with your first playthrough, but introduces new storyline threads or concepts that help you piece the full story together yourself. What we're left with is some of the densest themes tackled in a mainstream videogame.

WORLDWIDE

TAKING GAMING ONLINE

MARKED FOR DEATH: Every time you die, you are able to craft a short message to other players to read, not unlike *Dark Souls*' asynchronous messaging system.

Nier: Automata reaches into the depths of philosophy to make the player ask questions. Are we human? Do we truly have free-will? It seems odd for a game to do things like that, but even after putting the controller down, the themes that the game tackles stay with you. This genre-bending adventure is not one that you're soon going to forget. The biggest triumph of the game is to have you connect with characters that are not human, characters that we're programmed to distrust or hate, and constantly subverting your expectations, to prepare for the unexpected.

These melancholic themes are accompanied by a beautiful soundtrack which evokes the very best of *Ghost In The Shell*, the original *Nier*'s beloved soundtrack and *Zone Of The Enders*. Each area has a distinct new feel and tone, aided by the soundtrack's ever-changing styles. These tracks also dynamically change when the game switches between genres, to something more traditionally appropriate for the gameplay style.

One of our biggest criticisms of *Nier: Automata* is how it runs on PS4. We experienced frequent frame-rate drops that often took us out of the game, breaking immersion. Additionally, when going through new playthroughs to get to the true ending, it did feel as if there was some bloat, and retreading our steps a little too frequently in our 40-hour playthrough. Combined with the often boring and tedious side activities, it can become a slog.

To think that *Nier: Automata* was born out of an niche title such as *Nier*, which in turn was based on a 'joke' ending of *Drakengard*, *Nier: Automata* has the deep lore of the previous entries in its franchise, with some elements of the game that might not make sense to new players. However, for dedicated fans, there are plenty of nods to the previous titles that are easy to miss.

With its dedication to creativity, accompanied by an excellent narrative and soundtrack, *Nier: Automata* might just be unlike any other game you can buy off the shelf. The existence of *Nier: Automata* is a testament to experimentation with the conventions of gaming, and often flips it right on its head. The narrative cannot be accurately portrayed in any other medium aside from games, and is a creative achievement from the team at PlatinumGames and Yoko Taro. *Nier: Automata* is essential, despite its flaws, and is a game that should not be overlooked in the slightest.

WEAPONISED DESTRUCTION

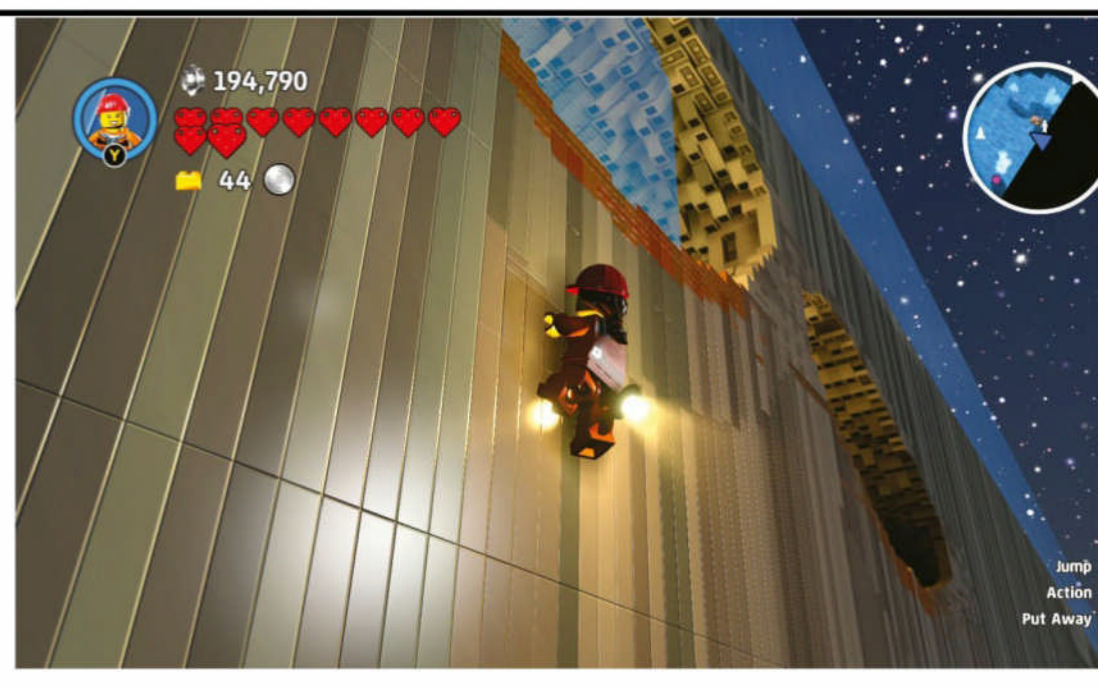
As 2B, you're able to switch between different classes of weapon, from heavy swords all the way to agile spears or hard-hitting fists. Not only does each animation flow incredibly well into another, but you're also able to switch up loadouts on the fly. This allows you to adapt your approach to tackling the different types of enemy that you're fighting, and it also encourages you to experiment in the breadth of the game's combat. Additionally, each weapon has its own 'story', which is unlocked via a menu any time you upgrade it.

VERDICT 8/10

MELANCHOLIC, WISTFUL AND CREATIVE AT EVERY TURN

IS MINECRAFT BRICKING IT?

LEGO Worlds



Above: Leaping off the edge of the world – literally – is one the easiest ways to find and explore the dozens of hidden caverns lying beneath the surface world. And if you get lost beneath (we did) you can simply tunnel you way out. **Below:** Far too often you'll find yourself moving quicker than the world can take, resulting in missing scenery, truncated buildings… sometimes for several seconds. On the plus side, occasionally you'll get an accidental sneak peek at nearby hidden chests.



For every touch of genius in this gorgeous, block-choc world, there's half a dozen irritations to dampen your enjoyment. A crappy camera, poor inventory system, a useless map, a confusing navigation page, the maddening music (thank god you can turn it off – you'll know what we mean when you meet your first Troublemaker): it's deep, itching-beneath-the-skin levels of frustration. Because beneath all that, there's bold, bright, and brilliant touches… but how many will actually bother to play long enough to discover it?

You'll see countless comparisons to *Minecraft* and, really, that's understandable. Mojang's iconic sandbox masterpiece is now one of the bestselling games of all time, and the fact it so clearly takes its inspiration from LEGO must, at one time or another, have frustrated LEGO bosses. Which is possibly why we're so frustrated at this lukewarm effort of a sandbox game; how can the world leaders of imaginative play deliver a game that lacks just that – imagination?

Unlike the familiar *LEGO* game blueprint, *Worlds* takes a more leisurely approach, delivering a barebones storyline (which can be encapsulated as 'find gold bricks to fix your ship and become a master builder') across an expansive, procedurally-generated universe that sees you visiting a vast range of different worlds to collect said bricks. Although when we say 'different' we actually mean 'similar' because sadly, there's little variance between each planet once you've hit enough bricks to unlock the larger worlds.

And it's gorgeous, really. As we've come to expect from TT Games, each world is stunningly realised, crafted with care, colour, and a huge dollop of good humour. Although most of the worlds depict similar scenes, scratch just a little beneath the surface and you'll find planets that are stuffed with secrets, complete with sunken cities, jewel-encrusted clifftops, and castles in the clouds – and those were just the secrets that we found.

LEGO Worlds' dizzying array of tools and techniques unlock pleasantly early on in your travels, and, thanks to its thoughtful tuition, you'll get to try everything out sooner rather than later. Your tools – though they are varied – don't overwhelm, and leaving you itching for experimentation. At first, everything – from meeting the great and varied minifig cast to taming the wild animals and hunting down hidden loot chests – is pretty enjoyable.

But the more you play, the more you realise how little *LEGO Worlds* has to offer. Despite the vast expanse of possibilities, *LEGO Worlds* is a shallow experience that will stagnate with alarming speed.

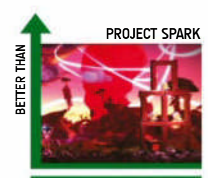
DESPITE THE VAST EXPANSE OF POSSIBILITIES, LEGO WORLDS IS A SHALLOW EXPERIENCE THAT WILL STAGNATE WITH ALARMING SPEED

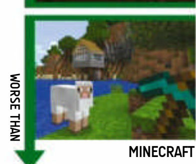
DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, Switch, PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Warner Bros
DEVELOPER: TT Games
PRICE: £24.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1 (2 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

PROJECT SPARK





MINECRAFT

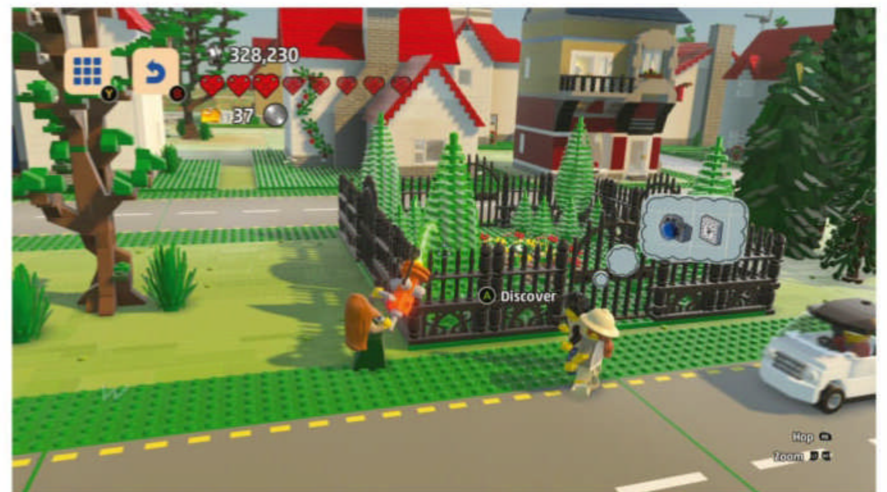
WORSE THAN

Building in *LEGO Worlds* – the one thing you'd expect to be actually enjoyable in a *LEGO* game – is distressingly tedious. Constructing a barn, brick by laborious brick, is enjoyable enough in real life, but thanks to a limited assortment of bricks and an unruly camera, building one to help out that friendly farmer is anything but. Half the time, the farmer's/maiden's/cowboy's optimistic, "Are you done yet?" resulted in a "Yes," from us, even though all we'd left them with was a wonky, foot-high rectangular(ish) box. A wonky, foot-high rectangular(ish) box we couldn't even be arsed to add a door to.

There's little fun in repeated battles with skeletons, just as there's scant to enjoy taking down pack after pack of zombies (particularly as we never – regardless of weaponry – seem to manage to despatch them in time to grab a coveted gold brick). The clunky camera quests are often a law until their own – yes, blocky friend of ours, we know you want a photo by a tree but seriously, we have dozens of the damn things – that half the time you'll have

MULTIPLAYER MAYHEM

Co-op is a muted affair, too. It's great to have split-screen couch co-op – particularly for the kid-shaped people in your life, or perhaps for family and friends new to gaming – but, bizarrely, the screen splits vertically rather than the classic horizontal, which means one of the game's few highlights – its bright, bold palette and beautifully-crafted worlds – are shortened rather than panoramic in view. The screen gets messy (and painfully slow) when there's a lot going on, and you won't always know to whom the onscreen instructions pertain, but the world's certainly a more interesting place with a pal alongside. Who knows, you might even be able to take down the game's formidable zombie teams when in a party of two, eh?



FAQs

Q. ISN'T THIS JUST MINECRAFT?
Not quite. *Worlds* offers up LEGO's trademark humour with gorgeous visuals and a storyline (albeit a thin one…).

Q. WHAT'S THE MAP'S KEY?
Gold funnels denote, well, hidden gold. Green denote missions (purple completed ones). White is your rocket's location.

Q. GOLD BRICK LOCATIONS?
Gold bricks can be found anywhere as random mission rewards, loot chest prizes or even carried by taunting Troublemakers. Explore!

Below: Interacting with the world around you rarely disappoints. Check out every prop and item – some will reward your curiosity.



quit without resolution. Besides the occasional golden brick, the Troublemakers rarely have anything worth chasing down, and we're tired of the recycled quests to find a doughnut or locate a cow or visit the same scrapyard over and over and over again. 20 or so hours in, they can't even be called quests, to be honest; thanks to the Discovery tool, all you need do it fire the whatever at the farmer and bingo, it's done. Great. He's given us an apple as a reward. Thanks, we'll add it to the pile.

Regrettably, our time with *Worlds* was also marred by glitches and bugs so prevalent, they became the norm rather than the exception. Three times the game locked up as to necessitate a hard console reset, and we regularly encountered issues with stuttering, dropped frame-rates, clipping, and sometimes having to stop mid-step to wait – for several seconds – for the world to catch up and populate around our minifig. Whilst we appreciate that once you're in the world there's no loading screens, this kind of interruption really pulls you out of the game… which is problematic given the game's grasp on you is already pretty slippery.

Most irritating of all, though, are the brilliant flashes that remind you how good *Worlds* could've been. The best bit? Unfettered exploration. Although there's not much deviation between each procedurally-generated world you encounter, scaling the edge of the world – and by that, we mean literally crawling down the edge of the world – will give access to the dozens of craggy crevices hidden underground. Finding the loot chests here is infinitely more satisfying than rounding up (or, let's face it, creating) five cats some fool inexplicably needs. Best of all, traversing a cavern often requires remodelling the landscape to free-up chests or get you through a small hole. That, friends, is without doubt where *LEGO Worlds* shines. What a shame so little else does.

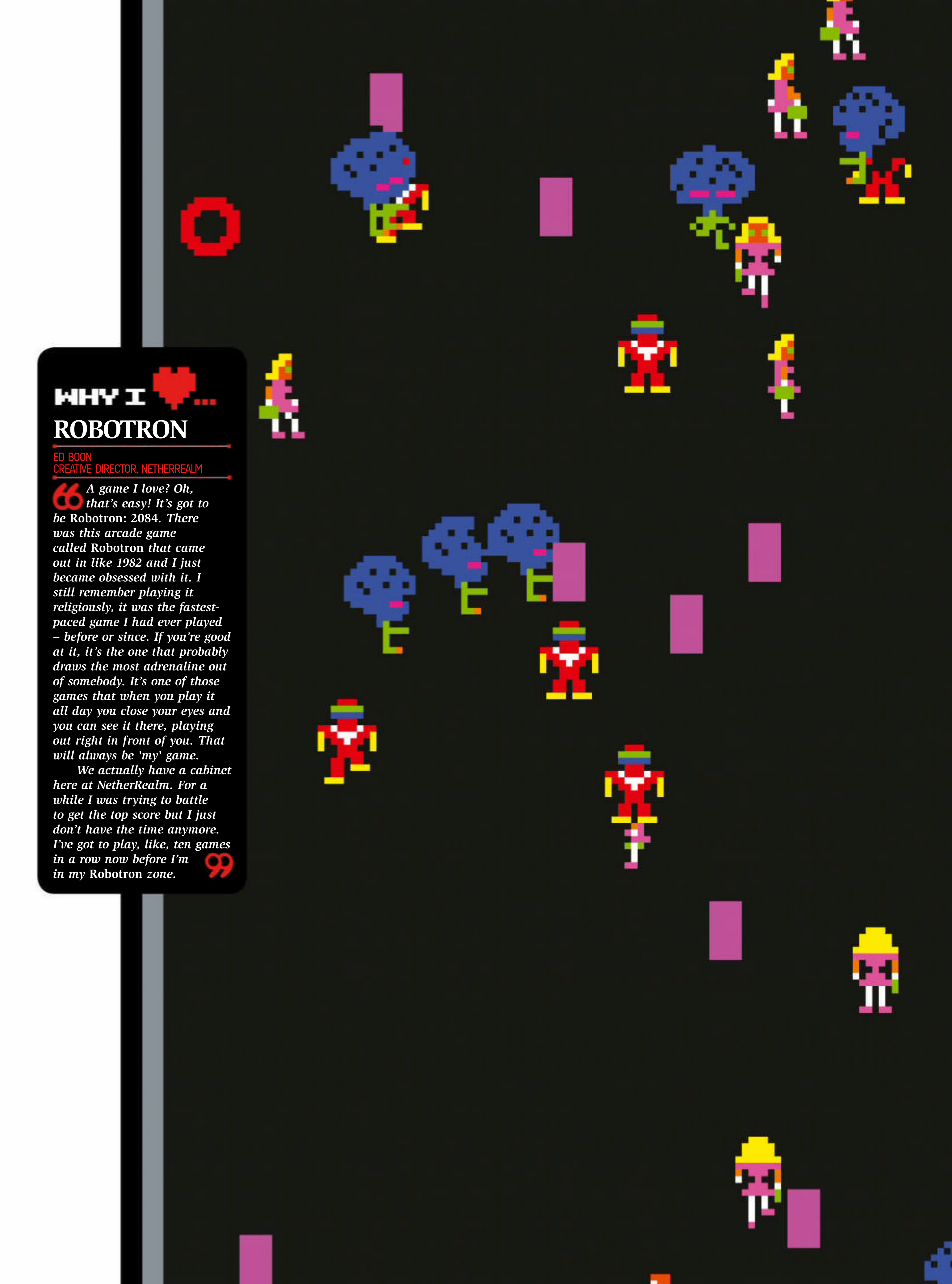
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

TOO LATE: Your ability to craft a world yourself from scratch should unlock so much sooner.
SWITCH IT UP: A better variety of side quests would add depth and variety to your travels.

VERDICT 6/10
JUST ANOTHER BRICK IN THE WALL





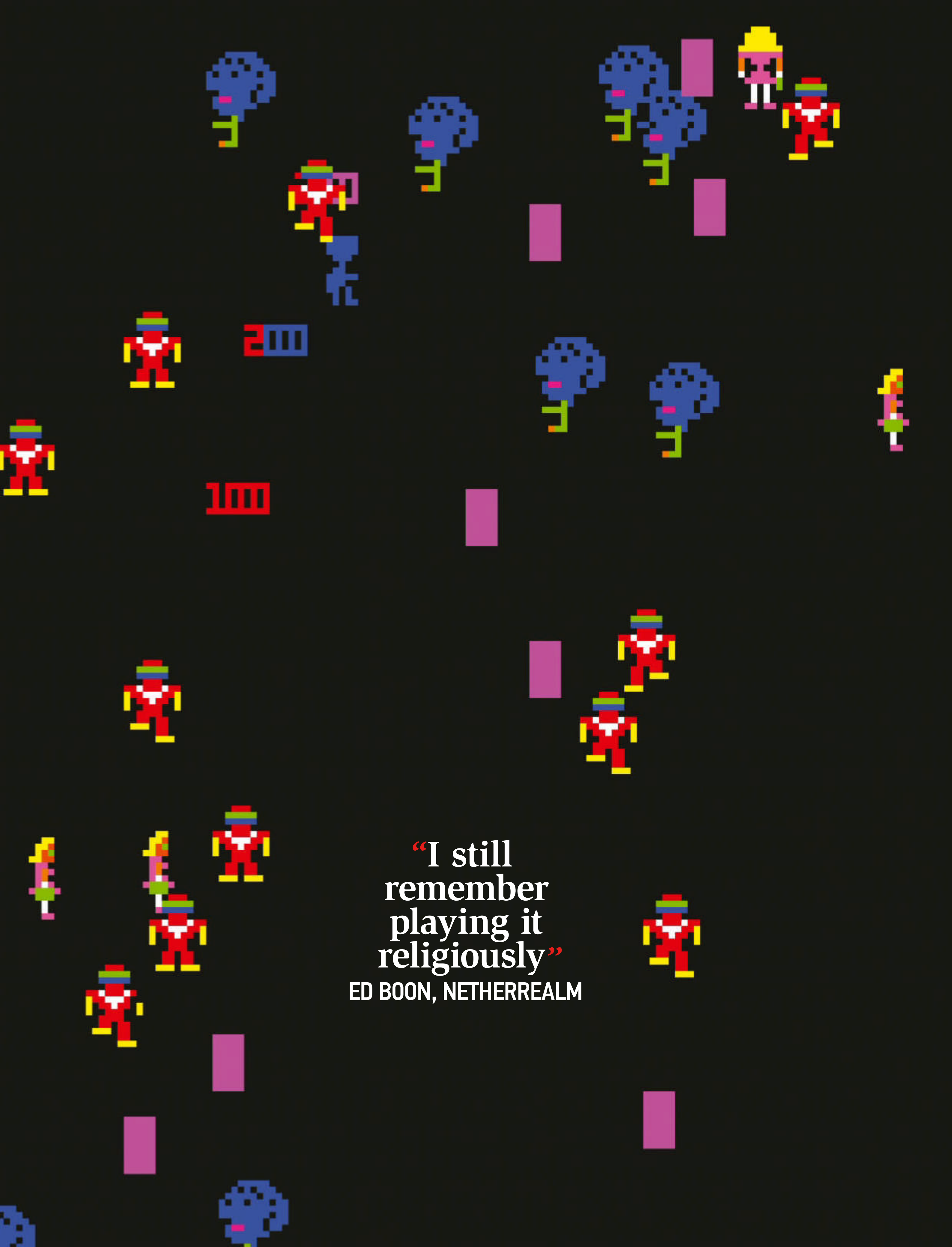
WHY I ❤...

ROBOTRON

ED BOON
CREATIVE DIRECTOR, NETHERREALM

"A game I love? Oh, that's easy! It's got to be Robotron: 2084*. There was this arcade game called* Robotron *that came out in like 1982 and I just became obsessed with it. I still remember playing it religiously, it was the fastest-paced game I had ever played – before or since. If you're good at it, it's the one that probably draws the most adrenaline out of somebody. It's one of those games that when you play it all day you close your eyes and you can see it there, playing out right in front of you. That will always be 'my' game.*

We actually have a cabinet here at NetherRealm. For a while I was trying to battle to get the top score but I just don't have the time anymore. I've got to play, like, ten games in a row now before I'm in my Robotron *zone."*



> "I still remember playing it religiously"
>
> ED BOON, NETHERREALM

RETRO

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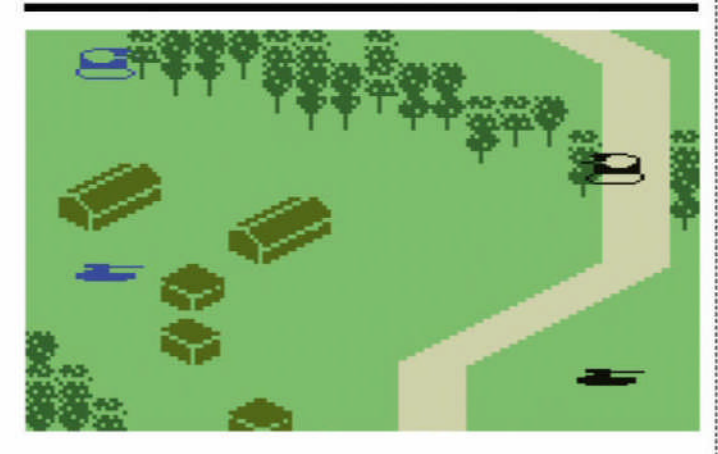


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THE RETRO GUIDE TO… INTELLIVISION

games™ revisits toy manufacturer Mattel's plucky console that dared to take on the mighty Atari 2600

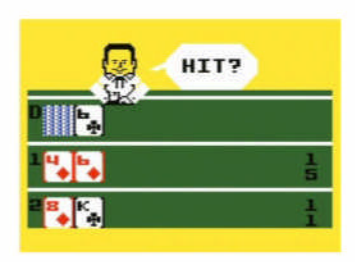
FORMED IN 1945, Mattel had forged a reputation in the toy market before electronic games began to make their mark. After experimenting with a number of handhelds, development of a home system was led by Dave Chandle. Technically superior to the Atari 2600, the Intellivision featured a graphics ROM that stored a selection of standard images and a controller that, while maligned, was innovative enough to be able to support more advanced games. After a test run in 1979 proved successful, worldwide distribution went ahead the following year. A solid release schedule of games helped, but the looming American videogame crash hit Mattel hard, and it closed its videogame division in January 1984. The Intellivision's life was extended by INTV, which focused on producing games for the master component, along with a cosmetically-improved version of the console itself. Divided into various 'networks' (or genres) for the Mattel releases, there were just 125 official games released and here are some of the best of those, and recent homebrew efforts.



ARMOR BATTLE 1979

APH TECHNOLOGICAL CONSULTING

No doubt inspired by the Atari 2600 classic *Combat*, *Armor Battle* was a clumsy and often laborious attempt at recreating tank-based warfare. However, once the players mastered the strange controls (you had to press the disc according to which direction the tank was facing to turn it), it was a surprisingly tense affair. Rotating the tank took time, and there was a fair amount of tactical scope as well: tanks moved quicker on roads, but could take cover in forests, and there were two tanks for each player, only one of which could be controlled at a time, leaving the other one vulnerable.





LAS VEGAS POKER & BLACKJACK 1979

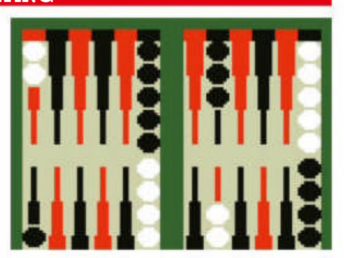
APH TECHNOLOGICAL CONSULTING

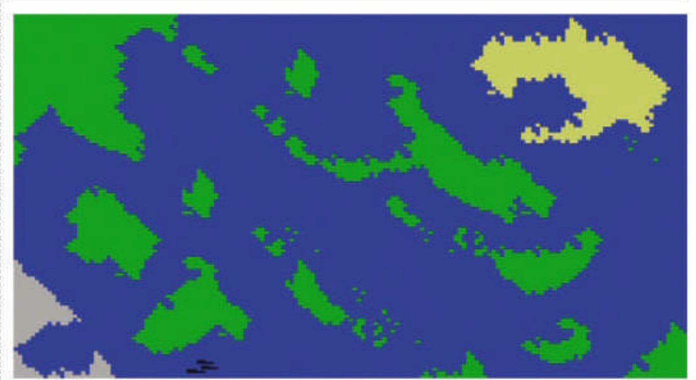
From 1980 onwards, this was a pack-in cartridge for the Intellivision, and a varied enough all-round package to prove popular with owners. Featuring blackjack, five- and seven-card stud poker and five-card draw poker, its back cover claim of being 'a casino in a cartridge' was a little too over-excitable for its own good; nonetheless, the game did its job admirably, also featuring a shifty-eyed dealer and some neat card dealing animations.

ABPA BACKGAMMON 1979

APH TECHNOLOGICAL CONSULTING

This computerised version of the popular board game was not only one of the first Intellivision games, but also the first to feature an official licence, in this case from the American Backgammon Players Association. As to the game itself, it recreated the original rather awkwardly, along with a rather annoying set of clicks and burps for sound.





SEA BATTLE 1980

APH TECHNOLOGICAL CONSULTING

Sea Battle was an early example of how the Intellivision could produce more complex games, even if the veneer of strategy was as thin as the fake wooden strip atop the console. There were two phases to the game: an overview section, where fleets could be assembled and deployed, before the action zoomed in once opposing fleets clashed, the players then taking control of the individual vessels in a battle to the death. Each ship had differing pros and cons; the battleship was powerful, yet slow, while the nippy PT boat could take few hits, but was capable of running rings around its more sluggish enemies.



AUTO RACING 1980

APH TECHNOLOGICAL CONSULTING

Every console needs a car racing game, and this top-down effort was the Intellivision's. Pretty graphics and a frantic pace impressed with *Auto Racing* at first, but alas the console's maligned controller didn't do the game justice; two steering systems were implemented, and in truth neither were entirely satisfactory. A lack of frills (and no computer controlled cars) didn't help either, yet *Auto Racing* was fun for a short while… if you had a friend to play with.

PGA GOLF 1980

APH TECHNOLOGICAL CONSULTING

The Intellivision was renowned for its sports titles, and *Golf* was another excellent simulation. Viewed from a top-down perspective, the game lacked any fancy graphics, yet for sheer playability and ease to get into, it was another superb multiplayer experience for golfing and gaming fans. Featuring a variety of terrain and hazards, the player could choose from nine clubs before (hopefully) guiding the ball onto the fairway using power, slice and hook options.





NASL SOCCER 1979

APH TECHNOLOGICAL CONSULTING

Presented in a side-on, semi-3D viewpoint (similar to other famous football games such as *Match Day*), *Soccer* belted on an official North American league licence, predating *FIFA* by more than a decade. The game itself was understandably limited, but still playable, thanks to the ability to actually be able to string passes together and incite some exciting goalmouth scrambles. Like many early Intellivision sports titles, *NASL Soccer* was unfortunately two-player only.





SPACE BATTLE 1979

APH TECHNOLOGICAL CONSULTING

As in the similarly-named *Sea Battle*, *Space Battle* boasted two screens, a radar styled overview of the action and a zoomed-in shoot-'em-up section. Originally rumoured to be a licence of the TV series *Battlestar Galactica* (some of enemy fighters look mightily familiar), the player's task was to protect the home planet at the centre of the map screen by sending out squadrons of fighters to destroy the enemy attackers. During the incessant sound of laser fire, the player had to decide which enemies required their attention most urgently, leaving the Intellivision to automate concurrent battles. Originally released in a red box, *Space Battle*'s designers deemed it too easy, hence the more common blue box release as part of Mattel's *Space Action Network*.

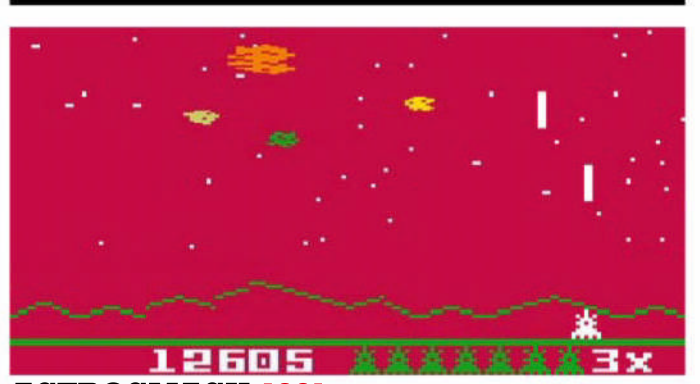


MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL 1980

APH TECHNOLOGICAL CONSULTING

Another in Mattel's famous sports licence titles, *Baseball* was also renowned as the game that was used to show off the console's power compared to the Atari 2600. But *Major League Baseball* didn't just look good, it was also remarkably complex for the time, featuring double and triple plays, rundowns and nine men per team. Some superb sound effects finished off the package, with the only drawback – again – its lack of a one-player mode.

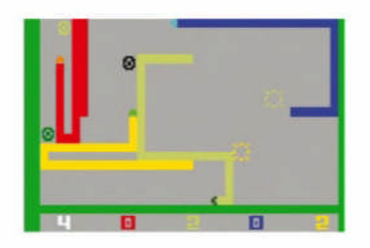
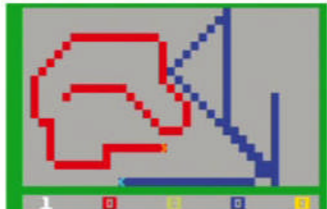
"ESSENTIALLY A MASHUP OF SPACE INVADERS AND ASTEROIDS, IT WAS THE PLAYER'S TASK TO DEFEND THEIR PLANET FROM FALLING ROCKS"



ASTROSMASH 1981

MATTEL

Astrosmash was one of those few games that became synonymous with the Intellivision. Essentially a mashup of *Space Invaders* and *Asteroids*, it was the player's task to defend their planet from falling rocks, and behind this concept lay an ingenious scoring system. Each rock that reached the surface reduced the player's score, forcing them into some difficult decisions under extreme time pressure. Add in spinning bombs – which caused the loss of a life, even if they didn't hit the player on landing – homing bombs, missile-spitting flying saucers and a score-multiplier and you had an addictive, compelling shoot-'em-up and one of the Intellivision's bestselling titles.

SNAFU 1981

MATTEL

A Mattel exclusive – it also came out on the Aquarius – *Snafu* was a homage (or rip-off, depending on your point of view) of the Atari 2600 classic *Surround*. The aim of the game was to control your constantly lengthening wall and trap the opposing players before they trapped you. Two players could compete along with two computer walls, making for a rather hectic screen within a very short time.



TRIPLE ACTION 1981

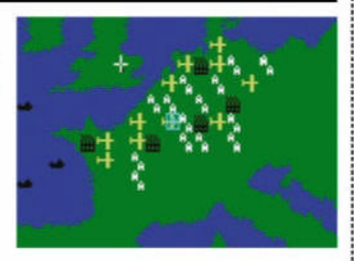
APH TECHNOLOGICAL CONSULTING



As the name suggested, *Triple Action* featured a trio of games bundled into one value-for-money package. *Battle Tanks* was an obvious copy of the Atari 2600's *Combat*, *Racing Cars* a vertically-scrolling race to 100 miles and, finally, *Biplanes*, a side-on combat simulation of the antiquated aircraft. Separately, each game would not have stood out; bundled together as a package, they complemented each other nicely and represented excellent value for money, with *Biplanes* edging the others out as the most fun to play.

B-17 BOMBER 1982

MATTEL



"Mattel Electronics presents… Bee-17 Bowmer!" were the words that miraculously sprung from the Intellivision upon switching it on, for *B-17 Bomber* was probably the most famous of cartridges that utilised one of Mattel's ill-conceived add-ons, the Intellivoice. As you might expect, the player took control of the eponymous aircraft and flew off to a chosen destination of targets. Once aloft, you could switch between multiple screens to either pilot the bomber, discourage enemy fighters or drop bombs on the targets. Fortunately the Intellivoice gave audio cues to help the player switch between their roles in another remarkably in-depth game for the time.

COLLECTOR PROFILE

With just 125 original official releases, the Intellivision isn't the hardest console to collect for – but the obscurity of some releases doesn't help. We meet Alex Pace who has every game released for it

Why did you decide to collect for the Intellivision?

It was my first console, and introduced me to the wonderful world of videogames. Collecting for it reminds me of that golden age and the sense of wonder when I played on it. Also, unlike the Atari 2600, it has good graphics and you *can* complete a collection. I always liked the controller too; 16 directional, with a lot of buttons, surely better than a simple joystick.

Do you still have your original Intellivision Master Component?

I packaged it up well, hoping I would one day have the space to keep it out and displayed. Unfortunately my father put the console and games in a cellar where it was all utterly destroyed by moss and damp. I was so shocked that I decided there and then to rebuy everything I had lost, and so it started.

So not many games to collect – which were the toughest to track down?

The rarest official game is most probably *Spiker*, which was the last official game released by INTV. I paid $800 for it, and now it's worth not less than $1,500. Probably the hardest to actually find were the keyboard component prototype games – and the component itself – which I fortunately managed to find in a bundle. Finally, some of the homebrew games are very hard to find, and therefore expensive too. The first releases such as *4-Tris*, *Robot Rubble* and *League Of Light* cost $50 upon release, and you can now sell them for $1,500 apiece.

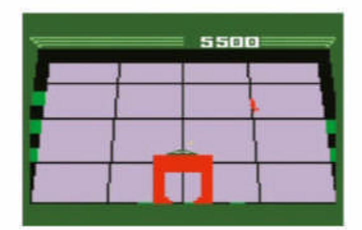
Do you have much unreleased stuff?

Yes, and the rarest of all is *Spelling Challenge* for the keyboard component. I think it's a one of a kind and I own it. I got it from a guy who knew someone at Mattel Electronics, I think a tester of prototype games.

Now you have a complete collection, what's the plan?

My next project is to open an Intellivision museum so people can visit and check out the collection, well-displayed and described.







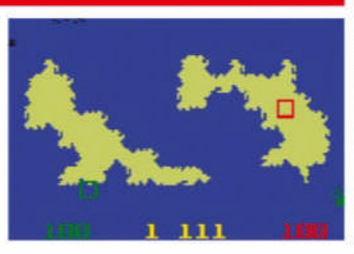
TRON DEADLY DISCS 1981

MATTEL

The Intellivision wasn't exactly flush with film licences, yet strangely the incomprehensible Disney sci-fi flick *Tron* received three games: *Maze-A-Tron*, *Tron: Solar Sailor* and this fantastic interpretation of its famous disc combat. Set within just one screen, the player would be pitted against three enemies of varied abilities. Throwing discs against their entry points opened portals into which the player could warp to the other side of the screen, although this incurred the wrath of a recogniser, which would trundle on screen and attempt to seal them up. A well-timed disc despatched the robot and yielded a nifty bonus score, and in addition to eliminating enemies, there was a block move that shattered enemy discs with a satisfying crunch – also an excellent way to rack up a high score. Just watch out for those orange swines with the stun batons – one touch and it was game over!

UTOPIA 1981

MATTEL



Designed by Don Daglow, *Utopia* perfectly encapsulated the Intellivision's ability to produce deep strategy games, unseen on its rivals. Playing one of two competing island states, the player needed to balance various resources against attacks from the other island and threats of nature such as violent storms. An immersive classic, and precursor to the real-time strategy genre as popularised by Westwood's *Command & Conquer*.



THUNDER CASTLE 1982/6

MATTEL

Often claimed as one of the best games on the console, *Thunder Castle* was another multi-screen maze game that was considerably ahead of many of its peers. Featuring some delightfully animated characters, the player took on the role of a brave knight, out to do nothing more than claim some valuable treasure while avoiding deadly dragons (in the forest maze), cunning wizards (castle) and a clutch of sinister demons (dungeon). Fun, playable, diverse and technically most impressive, it was stuck unreleased until INTV published it in 1986.

LOCK 'N' CHASE 1982

MATTEL



A conversion of a relatively obscure arcade *Pac Man* clone from Data East, *Lock 'N' Chase* just about does enough to elevate itself above mere clone status. Taking on the role of a rascally thief, the player negotiated each maze collecting coins and the occasional swag bag before making their escape. The best element, however, was undoubtedly the ability to turn the tables on the four pursuing cops and lock them up using a pair of yellow doors, albeit only temporarily.

MICROSURGEON 1982

IMAGIC

Rick Levine's surgical classic not only showed off the graphical capabilities of the Intellivision, but also its stylistic breadth of games, even if ultimately it was 'just' another shooting game. Playing the titular medical specialist, it was the player's task to deal with an undefined chemical emergency and treat the multiple infections within each patient. Different disorders called for different solutions, and the game scrolled neatly around a cross-section of each victim's body. A status screen handily informed you which body area needed the most urgent attention, and the player was rewarded financially for each patient saved. Given its author's medical background, *Microsurgeon* was as realistic as possible given the restraints of the hardware, and also one of the first cartridge games to feature compression techniques.



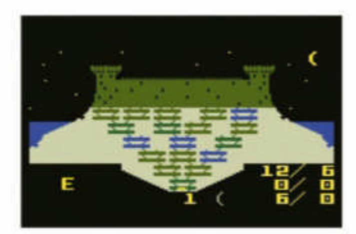




NIGHT STALKER 1982

MATTEL

Night Stalker, as its name suggests, was the Intellivision's stab at survival horror. Trapped in a spooky maze, the player's task was to simply stay alive by either avoiding or destroying the maze's robots, bats and spiders. Your only defence was a yellow pistol that contained just six shots; once spent, the pistol needed to be collected again, and was usually 'randomly' placed on the other side of the screen, ensuring a tense scramble to claim it once more. The robot assailant upgraded as the game progressed, with a rather despicable invisible version unleashed upon reaching 80,000 points. Still, there was always the safe haven of the central bunker…unless it was destroyed by the robots!





ADVANCED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: TREASURE OF TARMIN 1983

APH TECHNOLOGICAL CONSULTING

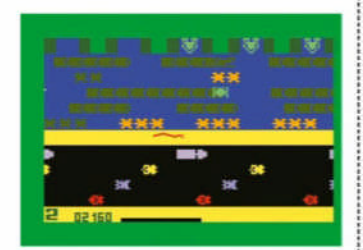
Incredibly sophisticated for its time, *Treasure Of Tarmin* was a 3D Maze role-playing game, and considerably dissimilar to its predecessor (the top-down view of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*). Taking place in real time, the map randomly generated a series of up to 256 rooms, many of which contained treasure, food or enemies, with the player having to negotiate towards the Minotaur's lair and liberate the monster of the titular treasure. Despite its repetitive nature, the first person view was a joy to behold in 1983, and the game's complexity a revelation.

BURGERTIME 1983

MATTEL

Another quality Intellivision arcade conversion, this time by coder Ray Kaestner. Despite a – necessarily – squashed screen, *Burger Time* retained most of the original's charm and playability as Peter Pepper transfers between ladders with less precision, making it a slice easier when the action got frantic. Another top-selling game on the console, *Burger Time* also spawned an Intellivision-exclusive sequel, *Diner*, that used an isometric view and was again coded by Ray Kaestner.





FROGGER 1983

PARKER BROTHERS

Of course, *Frogger* was a household name by 1983, and it was also one of the best arcade conversions on the Mattel console, recreating the graphics and feel of the original with aplomb. While the Intellivision's controller may have come up short on occasions (given the precise movement required by the game), the rare ability to 'wrap' around the river made the game crucially less frustrating.





CONGO BONGO 1983

SEGA

Congo Bongo was the sole official game on the Intellivision from arcade giants Sega, and a conversion of its own coin-op (others, such as *Buck Rogers Planet Of Zoom* were announced but not released). In terms of gameplay, it was similar to other arcade classics, particularly *Donkey Kong* and *Frogger*, only presented in a slightly squashed isometric perspective. The objective was to pursue a fugitive ape named *Congo*, while avoiding various jungle creatures and errant coconuts, and the action took place over stages that were *extremely* reminiscent of the aforementioned classics. So, yes, derivative, but fun nonetheless, and one of the rarest official Intellivision games out there.

MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE: THE POWER OF HE-MAN 1983

MATTEL



Given the toy line was a Mattel invention, it was inevitable the Intellivision should receive a videogame version of the famous patronising hero. It was another split-genre effort, and the first section saw He-Man aboard his Wind Raider, jetting towards Castle Greyskull, dodging fireballs and a mischievous Skeletor. In part two, the hero clashed with Skeletor directly, before a final face-off inside a nicely-realised Greyskull. Playable and fun, *The Power Of He-Man* lacked frills, but made up for it with thrills.

THIN ICE 1986

MATTEL

Also known as *Duncan's Thin Ice* (after a competition to name the main character with the aim of creating a new franchise and merchandising), the development of *Thin Ice* originally began in 1983, but for reasons too complex to go into here, was only released by INTV Corp three years later. A shame, because it's an excellent little arcade game where the lead character must skate around enemies, causing them to drop into the chilly ocean.

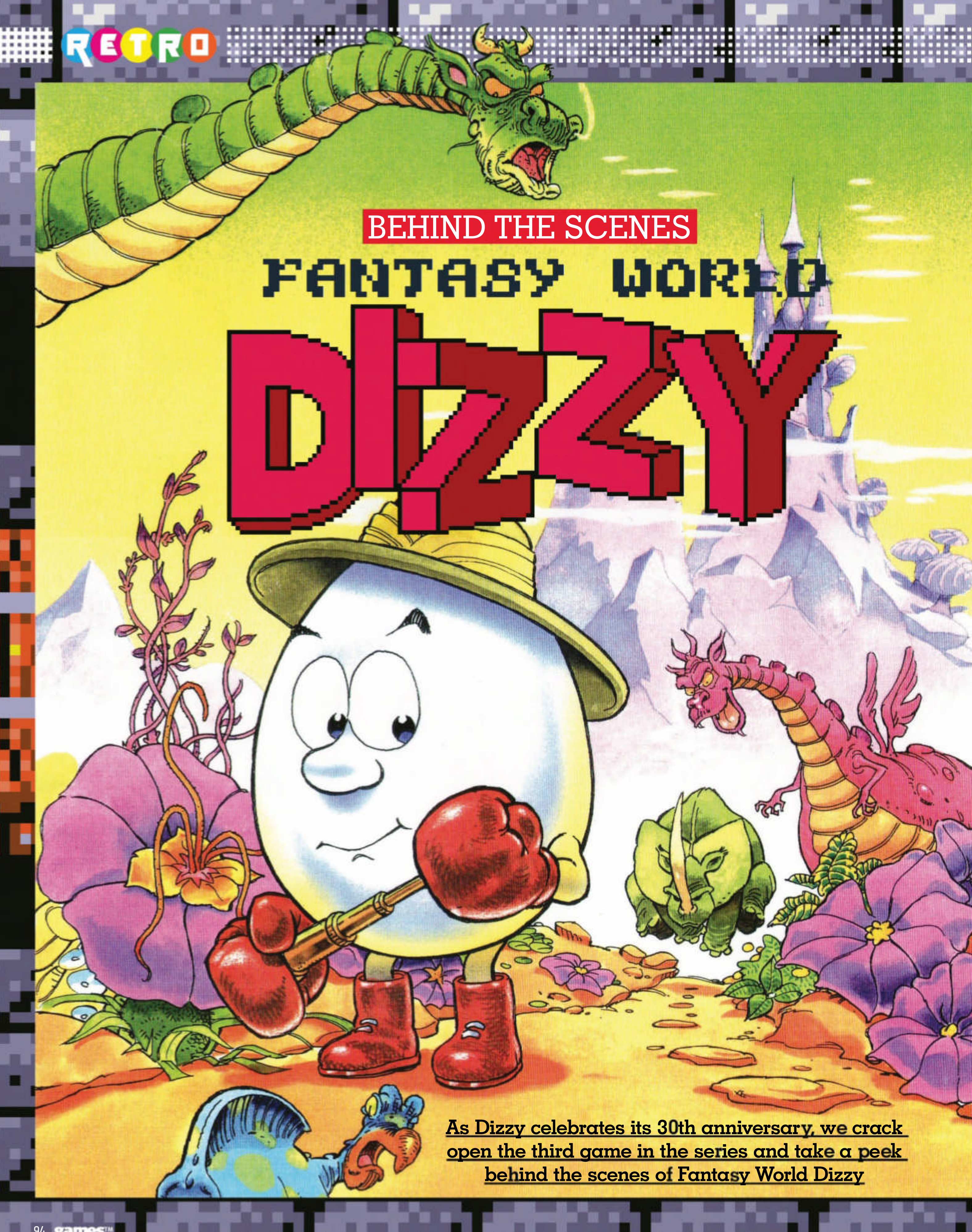




MINEHUNTER 2004

RYAN KINNEN

A long-time fan of the Intellivision, Kinnen's attention was drawn back to the console in 2000 with Joe Zbiciak's new game *4-Tris*. Suitably inspired, and drawing on the puzzle game *Minesweeper*, he created an Intellivision interpretation of the PC classic that works extremely well and was published by Intelligentvision. The game features three different sizes of maze and was also released with a set of controller overlays.



BEHIND THE SCENES

FANTASY WORLD DIZZY

As Dizzy celebrates its 30th anniversary, we crack open the third game in the series and take a peek behind the scenes of Fantasy World Dizzy



■ The Olivers were keen to include dragons in their fantasy world and stopping it from breathing fire at you required a bit of bottle.

Released: 1989
Format: ZX Spectrum, Amstrad CPC, Commodore 64, Amiga, Atari ST, DOS
Publisher: Codemasters
Key Staff: Philip Oliver (programmer), Andrew Oliver (programmer), Neil Adamson (graphics), David Whittaker (music)

EGGS WERE NOT EXACTLY FLAVOUR OF THE YEAR IN 1989. Former Conservative junior health minister Edwina Currie had declared in a TV interview that most of the UK's egg production was infected with salmonella at the end of the previous year, and the effect was the biggest dip in the country's egg consumption since the second world war – a controversy, which continued to rage for months.

Under those circumstances, it was perhaps not, you may think, the best time to be releasing games starring characters that looked like eggs. Yet two developers – brothers Philip and Andrew Oliver – were feeling rather immune to the ongoing furore. Their games involved an anthropomorphic egg character that could bounce around the screen, avoiding life-sapping obstacles while collecting objects used to solve puzzles and they were selling rather well indeed.

The first such game, *Dizzy – The Ultimate Cartoon Adventure*, had been released in 1987 followed by *Treasure Island Dizzy* in the Summer of 1988. "*Treasure Island Dizzy* had been an instant number-one hit in the UK, probably selling between 200,000 and 300,000, and earning us in the region of £30,000," says Philip.

But something strange was also happening. "Sales of the original *Dizzy* from 1987 were shooting up, too," Philip adds. It soon became apparent that there was a growing appetite for these egg-based games and so Codemasters – having already shoehorned the character into *Fast Food Dizzy* – ordered another. *Fantasy World Dizzy* was born.

BEFORE THE EGG

Philip and Andrew Oliver had been highly-successful developers. The duo's first game was published in *C&VG* magazine in 1983 and its debut release proper, *Super Robin Hood*, had become a major hit back in 1985. An estimated seven per cent of all of the games being sold in the UK were said to be attributable to the Oliver twins and they were certainly prolific. By the time the brothers had gotten round to *Fantasy World Dizzy*, they already had games such as *Killapede*, *Ghost Hunters*, *Professional Ski Simulator*, and *Professional BMX Simulator* under their belts.

Phillip's and Andrew's successes had earned them enough money to be able to buy some land a few miles from their parents' home in the pretty town of Trowbridge in Wiltshire. They had a modern four-bedroom house built on the plot and they moved into their home in November 1988. As well as living there, the brothers turned a spare bedroom into an office. It was in that room that *Fantasy World Dizzy* was brought to life on a pair of 8086 PCs fitted with 20MB hard drives and Programmer Development System boards. "These boards had trailing cables that linked to an Amstrad CPC and a Spectrum," Andrew says of the complete development setup that the twins used.

With their friends at university, there were no distractions, allowing the pair to knuckle down and get on with the task in hand. As before, this *Dizzy* title was going to be a budget game, but despite the low projected price, the brothers were not prone to cutting corners. "We believed that if the game sold at a quarter of the price, it would shift four times as many copies, so making us the same money," says Philip. "With more people getting to enjoy the game, we wanted everyone to be happy with the value for money they got."

DIZZY HAD FRIENDS AND A FAMILY AND THAT FELT NICE. IT'S A SHAME THEY WERE ALWAYS IN TROUBLE

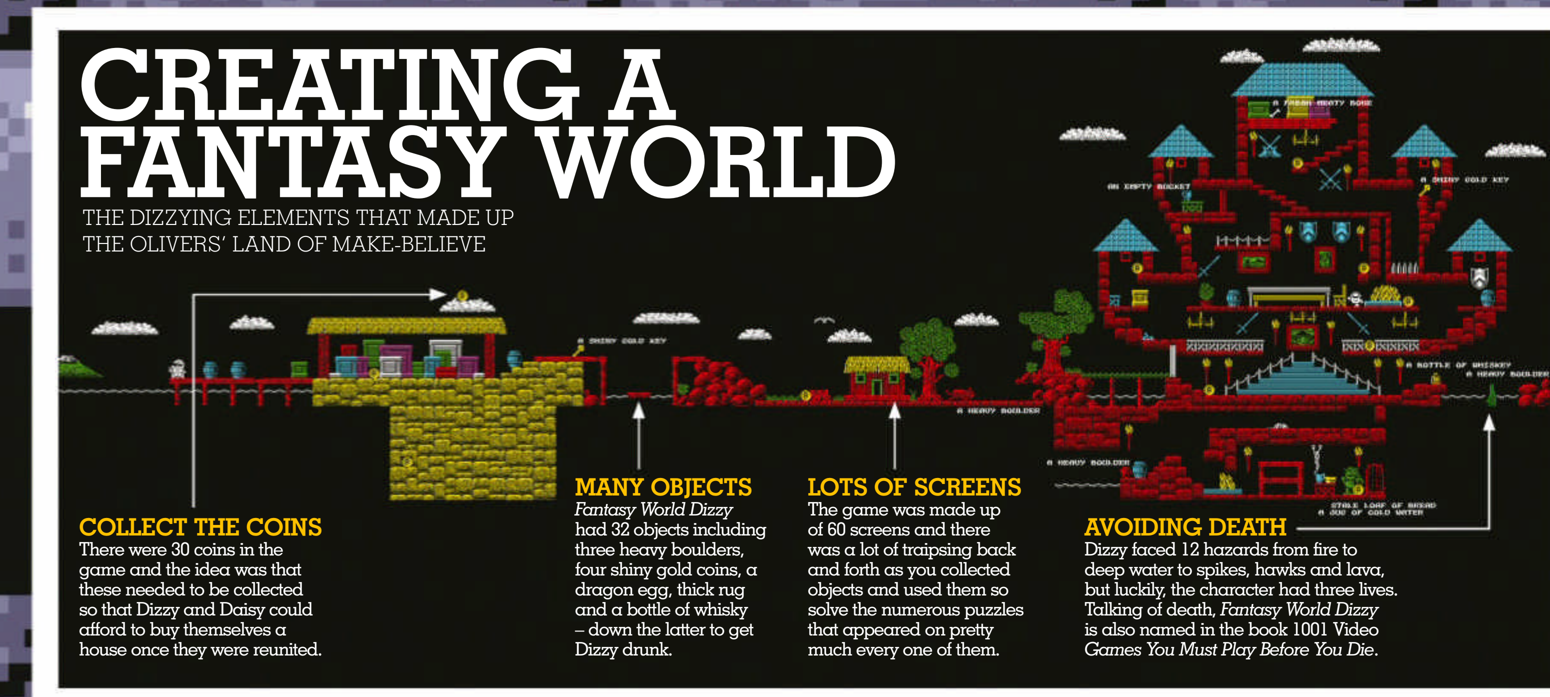
They wanted to infuse the game with as many features as possible and continued to work out ways of getting around the restrictions of having just 40K to play around with (their 48K Spectrums used 8K of screen memory). "The first thing we did," Andrew continues, "is come up with a high level concept. We needed a theme, a name and the main objective." They believed a fantasy setting would allow their imagination to run freely and give them scope to introduce an expanded world that players would enjoy exploring.



■ There were some nice quirks and a good sense of humour in *Fantasy World Dizzy* such as being able to kick Dozy into the water.

CREATING A FANTASY WORLD

THE DIZZYING ELEMENTS THAT MADE UP THE OLIVERS' LAND OF MAKE-BELIEVE



COLLECT THE COINS
There were 30 coins in the game and the idea was that these needed to be collected so that Dizzy and Daisy could afford to buy themselves a house once they were reunited.

MANY OBJECTS
Fantasy World Dizzy had 32 objects including three heavy boulders, four shiny gold coins, a dragon egg, thick rug and a bottle of whisky – down the latter to get Dizzy drunk.

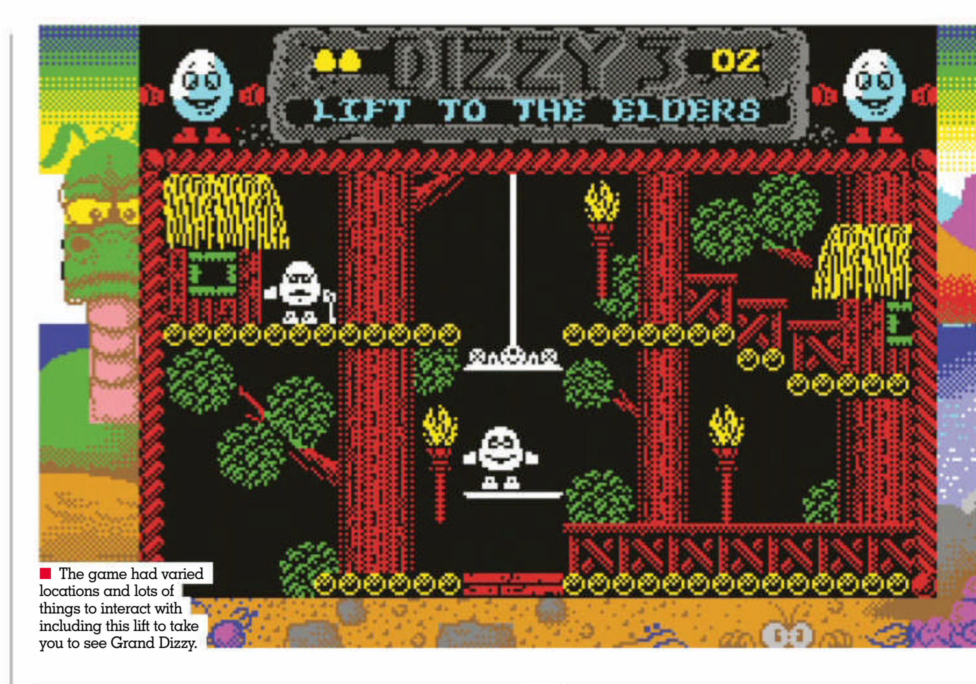
LOTS OF SCREENS
The game was made up of 60 screens and there was a lot of traipsing back and forth as you collected objects and used them so solve the numerous puzzles that appeared on pretty much every one of them.

AVOIDING DEATH
Dizzy faced 12 hazards from fire to deep water to spikes, hawks and lava, but luckily, the character had three lives. Talking of death, *Fantasy World Dizzy* is also named in the book 1001 Video *Games You Must Play Before You Die*.

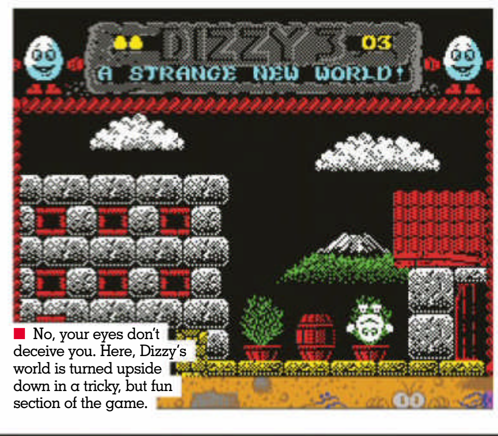
Even so, they decided to make it familiar. "We came up with the idea of referencing classic stories, since they are something everyone learns from a young age and we felt that knowledge of them would lead to the game's solutions," says Philip. "We hit upon the idea of *Jack And The Beanstalk* because we saw the potential for it to be a great quest chain. It needed players to take a cow to a shopkeeper to get magic beans, grow the magic beans to get a beanstalk, that takes you to a castle in the clouds." The puzzles, he says, followed on from there.

PIECING DIZZY TOGETHER
As with the previous *Dizzy* games, the Olivers wanted to build on the idea that players needed to find objects and take them to places where they could be used. To prevent players becoming frustrated, these puzzles needed to be fun, but logical – to have gamers slapping their forehead with an, "Of course!" when the solution became apparent. "Fundamentally, the puzzle gameplay of *Dizzy* games was, 'Find key, take it to the door and unlock it,' but we figured that rather than have lots of keys, we could draw each 'key' as a different object and each door as a different obstacle. It was then a case of thinking of those pairs of objects and obstacles before working out how lengthy we wanted the chains to be. At the same time, we wanted players to be able to solve the puzzles in any order so that they felt they had ownership and were in control of their destiny."

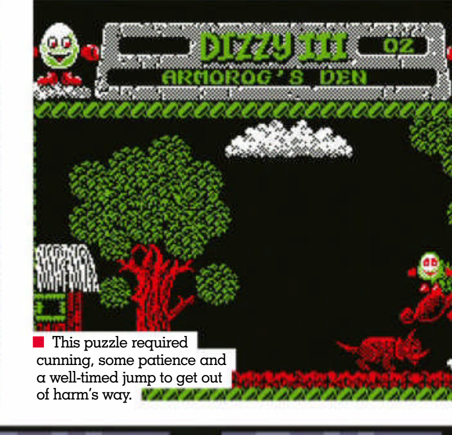
Much of the Olivers' time was spent figuring the best combinations of objects and how the puzzles would drive the narrative forward. "*Dizzy* started by being locked in a dungeon so we had a door, water and a stale old loaf of bread," explains Andrew. "We thought these are likely things you'd find in a dungeon but we needed to figure a use for that bread. Perhaps an animal could block your way and once it is given the bread it would run away. What animal would you find in a dungeon that would want bread? A rat, of course, and so it goes on."



The game had varied locations and lots of things to interact with including this lift to take you to see Grand Dizzy.



No, your eyes don't deceive you. Here, Dizzy's world is turned upside down in a tricky, but fun section of the game.



This puzzle required cunning, some patience and a well-timed jump to get out of harm's way.



WELCOMING THE YOLKFOLK
The game introduced the Yolkfolk, which, gave Dizzy some characters to talk to and brought a fresh dimension to the game. You could gain clues and grab objects from them. Grand Dizzy hands you a pickaxe and a crowbar, for instance.

TALES OF OLD
The game may have created its own fantasy setting but it drew on tales of old such as *Jack And The Beanstalk*. Instead of Dizzy, the Olivers had originally considered using out-of-copyright characters such as Robin Hood but felt something new would work better.

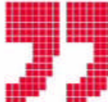
PRODUCING THE PUZZLES
The entire game was written over just 29 days in September 1989 with the process of creating the map, the puzzles and the order of the game mostly nailed down in the first week of production.



WHAT THEY SAID...

Fans of the energetic egghead won't be disappointed with the latest Dizzy adventure. The puzzles are more cunning than ever, but are counterbalanced by the addition of more lives, which encourages experimentation

Amstrad Action, 1990



But they went further. Rather than simply concentrate solely on objects, *Fantasy World Dizzy* introduced a set of characters collectively termed the Yolkfolk. Although they had been referred to in the box instructions of the previous two games, it provided the first opportunity for players to see and enjoy chatting with hippy Dylan, cool Denzil, sleepy Dozy, grandfather Grand Dizzy, and protagonist Dizzy's girlfriend, Daisy.

"We realised that we were building stories and so we wanted more excuse for 'dialogue'," says Philip. "If Dizzy could find people in need, they would be giving him missions, in the form of small fun speech bubble conversations. Before then, it was just 'try and get off the desert island'. But we thought if players could meet friendly folk and obvious villains like the evil Wizard Zaks then the story could be told more easily and new types of puzzles could be created."

The Yolkfolk extended the narrative and scope for puzzles. "They made the place feel more alive," Philip continues. "Dizzy was no longer alone in empty places, with only enemies around. Dizzy had friends and a family, and that felt nice. It's a shame they were always in trouble and needed rescuing, but that lead to puzzles and made Dizzy the hero." Just about the only thing they didn't have was a voice. Although the Olivers had used sampled speech in *Super Robin Hood*, it wasn't possible to hear the main character or the Yolkfolk speak.

Instead, Spectrum owners could console themselves with a voice croaking "*Fantasy World Dizzy*" on the title screen while all players could hum along to the cheerful tunes that played throughout the various versions of the game. On the Spectrum and CPC versions, music for the title screen and the game itself were created by musician David Whittaker. "We have zero talent in music and wrote to David telling him we were making another *Dizzy* game," says Andrew. "All credit must go to him for the catchy music."

But then it was important to get this right. The game was spread over dozens of screens, which meant the music had to be listened to for a long time. The Olivers were also conscious of keeping players interested so they thought long and hard about how the chained puzzles were linked and could be woven together and how they could keep the game visually appealing, with multiple environments.

FANTASY GAMES ARE ALWAYS BETTER WITH DRAGONS

MAPPING THE GAME

"We thought about the map in regions because we felt people would remember very different looking areas rather than 60 or so random rooms," Philip explains. "So we came up with caves, mines, castles, a volcano and, of course, the treehouse." By devising the lore that the Yolkfolk lived in tree houses, the developers were also able to lend the game an interesting maze of ledges, inspired by the Ewok village in *Star Wars*.

"We felt the forest would be an interesting part of the landscape, but when a game is viewed side-on you have the problem that you walk on the ground through a forest yet we wanted to use the whole screen, and make sure it lead off in all directions, not just the bottom left and right," Andrew explains.

The maps were sprite-mapped, which made them efficient and the eventual in-game graphics were produced using Panda Sprites, which was a sprite package written by the Olivers in 1985 when they were still at school. Artist Neil Adamson tidied up a few of the larger sprites, including Zaks, the castle and the dragon and he produced the game's title screen too.

There was also room for some fun. When players attempted to interact with Dozy over and over, for

WHAT THEY SAID...

All the puzzles in the game are set at just the right complexity so anyone can play and get enjoyment out of the game without having to be an absolute genius. In fact, it's worth buying just for the cute graphics

Crash, 1990



As well as collecting coins, there was a need to grab four keys but they weren't always in the easiest of locations.



You didn't always have to do things by the book in the game – you could solve a puzzle here or use good timing instead.

instance, Dizzy would end up kicking him into the sea. In some versions, he would float while in others he would drift out to sea. "We always wanted to put little surprises in," laughs Philip. "Having put Dozy on the end of the pier, we thought it would be fun to have an interaction with him. But to simply kick him in would not create much of a surprise. I'm not sure if it was Andrew or I who choose to do this, but it would have been a decision made in less than a few minutes – as were most decisions in this game."

The game also included a quirky shopkeeper who appeared out of nowhere and who was inspired by the classic cartoon *Mr Ben*. "[The TV series] always had the line, 'As if by magic the shopkeeper appeared,' and *Mr Ben* did this to avoid having to create an animation," says Philip. "We had the same problem because we only had enough computer memory for a single sprite so it was a perfect way to introduce the character and it felt nice and quirky."

To add to the sense of magic and majesty, the Olivers added dragons to the game world, although they were initially at a loss about how they could best use them ("Sometimes it's hard to work out how they fit into a game," says Andrew). Although dragons can typically breathe fire, stomp around smashing things up or fly, the game included the former and it had Dizzy dodge fiery breath while working out how best to tackle the creature. "It was a nice touch," Andrew says. "Fantasy games are always better with dragons."

WE REALISED THAT WE WERE BUILDING STORIES AND SO WE WANTED MORE EXCUSE FOR DIALOGUE

The Olivers also decided it would be a good idea to include a secondary quest and allow players to collect gold coins as they went along. There were 30 of these scattered around the world and they were a bonus that made replays more likely for those who ignored the coins the first time around. "We wanted people to complete the stories and the puzzles relied on the items, which we didn't want to be too difficult to collect," Philip says. "But we wanted the extra challenge for those 'hardcore' players who wanted more. Adding the coins gave that extra stretch goal and it was easy to do and ensured every area had stuff to do."

HARD TO CRACK

But as development continued, Philip and Andrew were also keen to learn from their past mistakes. Gamers and magazine reviewers had called out *Treasure Island Dizzy* for having just a single life that, coupled with easy ways to die, made the game unnecessarily difficult, forcing players to hunt around for a cheat code. It was never intentional – the game had started out with multiple lives – but the Olivers had encountered a problem with *Treasure Island Dizzy*'s scrolling inventory system that made it possible to put down a snorkel while underwater, which drowned Dizzy and they needed a way around it.

"When we put them back next to where Dizzy died, he'd drown again," Philip says. "We discussed how to resolve this, and with time against us, we foolishly decided to remove the problem completely by removing multiple lives. This was a quick and nasty fix as it had the obvious side-effect of making the game much

MYSTERY WORLD DIZZY

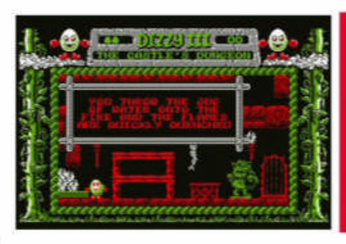
A NES-version of Fantasy World Dizzy has now been unearthed

ALTHOUGH THE OLIVERS' *Fantasy World Dizzy* itself did not enjoy a console release, the twins used it as direct inspiration for a NES title called *Mystery World Dizzy*. This game began familiarly enough, with everyone's favourite egg needing to escape a dungeon by putting out a fire, pacifying a rat and making his way through a castle, just like in *Fantasy World Dizzy*. "But we knew how things had moved on and we felt we could do more than just a port," says Philip.

The twins sought to improve the game. "We looked to change and embellish it, and we felt that it had changed enough to warrant a new name." Yet it was never released... until now. On 8 April, the Olivers told an audience at the National Videogame Arcade that they had not only found the game but had worked on making it available to play for free online. You can head to mysteryworlddizzy.com to see it in action or check out the Kickstarter campaign to buy it on a special edition NES cartridge.



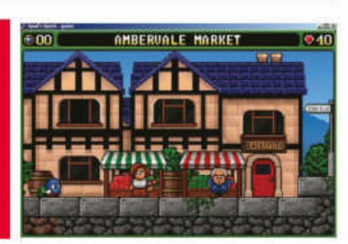
> A GAMING EVOLUTION Fantasy World Dizzy > Clover > Spud's Quest



Clover was akin to an adult Dizzy, taking the genre and making a political-puzzler out of it. The twins published it via Blitz 1UP.



Indie game *Spud's Quest* was influenced by *Dizzy* and it paid a cutesy, retro homage to the series on the PC in 2013.



harder than intended." It was not a mistake they were about to repeat with *Fantasy World Dizzy*, which granted the player three lives. It didn't make it an absolute breeze to get through, though, since there were so many ways of being killed.

Some of the puzzles stood out for being harder than others and one of them was tackling the Armarog that was lurking in around its den. Players had to pick up a meaty bone, jump down in the Armarog's den, quickly grab a boulder for use later in the game and drop the bone to lure the Armarog towards them. They would then need to make a timely dash in the hope the Armarog didn't catch and kill them. It wasn't quite up there with the goat puzzle in *Broken Sword* but it stumped a fair few players.

"We tried to make the puzzles logical and look right in place," says Andrew. "To us, they all seemed fine but there's always going to be some puzzles that people just didn't get." In some ways, the issue was that the twins didn't test the game on other people ("We just made sure they didn't have bugs and mastered them," Andrew adds) but they figured any level of difficulty was a good thing because it got people discussing the game. "When someone got stuck, they could go and ask family or friends and it wouldn't be a case of them needing to know the mechanics of a game because of the logic nature of the puzzles," he adds. "But, remember, the technology was very limited, so ideas didn't always translate to the screen perfectly."

For those who got well and truly stuck, there was an opportunity to call an 0898 helpline that charged players by the minute to hear sections of the solution. To create these, the Olivers wrote scripts that they asked their sister to read on to a tape. Codemasters then set up the phone line and used the prerecorded tapes to divulge information to the callers. It proved to be incredibly popular and it made a lot of money for the publisher. With a spot of haggling, the Olivers secured a 30 per cent cut.

With the Spectrum and CPC version in the bag, Codemasters then arranged for the game to be converted to other formats. Programmer Ian Grey and musician Steve Barrett worked on the Commodore 64 version. Meanwhile, coder Andy Green and graphics artist Terry Lloyd crested the Atari ST, Commodore Amiga and PC versions, with Allister Brimble producing the music on all three versions. The PC version was released into the public domain but after five minutes players had to phone an 0898 number for a passcode to progress further. Further calls were needed after 15, 30 and 60 minutes. It was an unusual move.

Still, *Dizzy* became a hit once more. Sales of *Fantasy World Dizzy* exceeded 600,000 units and the game went down a storm with reviewers, attracting scores in the late 80 and early 90 per cents. "We were really pleased with the game, especially given that it was written in a number of weeks," says Philip. "We probably only spent a few days come up with the few main threads and then started laying out the structure of the story and the map. But it came together well and ideas sprung to mind all the time. We fitted as much in as we could and those we couldn't get in there went into the next game."

The next game in the series was *Magicland* Dizzy but the Olivers did not develop this game in its entirety. They relinquished control, handing the reigns to Big Red Software and a designer called Neal Vincent. And yet the *Dizzy* legacy remains that of Philip and Andrew. "*Fantasy World Dizzy* got to number one in the Gallup chart and the previous games saw an increase in sales too. [Those] were amazing days."



■ The original *Dizzy* billed itself as a cartoon adventure and the 16-bit and DOS versions of *Fantasy World Dizzy* certainly looked the part.



The Apple II version of the game wasn't the prettiest of the ports, but it laid the foundations for the RPG series.

MAKING WIZARDRY BETTER

"Writing the game in assembly made the game a lot faster, using more colourful art for the backgrounds instead of that black border[and] nice fonts – all these little things. And now for the art: originally the art was just static images – just like *Wizardry* – but then I said, 'Hey look, I've got this art animation technology that I did for *Borrowed Time*.' With this I was able to take a series of pieces of art and animate them using a technique I called the XOR Animation."





INTERVIEW

REBECCA HEINEMAN

When it comes to famed adventure RPG series The Bard's Tale, there are few names as integral as Rebecca Heineman. **games™** discovers just how tumultuous the popular series turned out to be

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



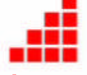
The Bard's Tale (1985)
Programmer



The Bard's Tale III (1988)
Designer



Dragon Wars (1989)
Programmer



SO HOW DID *The Bard's Tale* initially begin development? What sorts of things inspired its creation?
To give you a good perspective, in the early ages a lot of people – myself included – we played *Wizardry*, back then it was like everybody played it. And that's really what sowed the seeds for the creation of *Bard's Tale* because we just looked at the game written in Pascal on the Apple II and said, 'You know, we can do so much better, especially if it was written in assembly.' Brian Fargo and Mike Cranford were high school buddies – that was a little bit of nepotism going on there – and Cranford was an independent contractor and he had put together a very simple demo of walking through a city with the initial layout of the screen that we know now as *Bard's Tale*.

How did you get involved with the project?
At the time I was writing *Borrowed Time*, I believe. I had written *Tass Times In Tonetown* and that technology that I used for the graphic rendering ended up in *Bard's Tale*. When the Apple II version was finished by Cranford – and I had written all the art tools and all the graphic engines, all the disc drivers, all the behind-the-scenes stuff – I did the ports.

Did you get involved with the sequel?
Well, there was the infamous part where Cranford held the disc hostage from Brian [Fargo] for a new contract for the sequel. The contract gave Cranford total control over the sequel. So *Bard's Tale II* had very little involvement from Interplay, except for doing QA. Afterwards, Brian negotiated with Cranford to end the relationship. Once this was done Brian really wanted to do a new game, rather than another *Bard's Tale* and so he was focused on *Wasteland*.

WHILE CRANFORD WAS THE LEAD OF THE GAMES, I WAS TAKING CARE OF ALL THE PORTS, THE SUPPORT, THE BUG FIXES AND THE UPDATES

So the series nearly ended there?
It could've, yes, but I went to him and said, 'Look, I really want to do another *Bard's Tale*. I'm the one who did all the low-level tech and stuff,' and Brian was like, 'Fine, you do it,' because he wasn't really that interested in doing a *Bard's Tale III*. So I took over the project, got Michael Stackpole to write a story.

Why did you want to work on another *Bard's Tale* game so badly?
I love the franchise, I love the game. I love working on it. When I was working on *Bard's Tale* and *Bard's Tale II*, I really made the game my own. While Cranford was the lead of the games, I was taking care of all the ports, I was taking care of all the support, I was doing all the bug fixes and the updates. I really love the

game and when I had the opportunity – you know, when Cranford was given the boot – I jumped in, I said 'I want to continue this franchise.' And thankfully with Brian so enamoured with *Wasteland* he basically just threw it to me as a bone, and what's hilarious is *Bard's Tale III* and *Wasteland* released at about the same time – and *Bard's Tale III* trounced *Wasteland*.

Now that you were in control of the series, what did you want to do with the third game?

I gave Mike Stackpole carte blanche. I said, 'Here is the basic idea: we're going to start off with Tarjan, the Mad God…' because I wanted it to be more of a sequel to *Bard's Tale* and I wanted to pretend *Bard's Tale II* never happened. 'So it's going to be back to Skara Brae' – which essentially has nothing to do with Scottish lore, just so you know, we just picked the name because it sounded cool. We wanted to take the Mad God Tarjan because you woke him up in *Bard's Tale* and he's come back with a vengeance. Other than that, I said, 'Mike, make me a compelling story,' and he came back with this grandiose vision thinking, 'Oh, Becky will never get to do it,' and I said, 'Sure, I'll figure it out.' I made a few modifications to the engine – basically upgrades – and with that I was then able to make the engine work with his vision. And sure enough, *Bard's Tale III* was in full production. I had more art, I had more text, I had more maps – and I only had to ask for one more floppy disc.

How did you manage that?

It was a combination of three things. One: I write very tight code, so the game engine – the code – is actually smaller than *Bard's Tale* and *Bard's Tale II* for the Apple 2E. The second thing I did was the compressed text, because you know a game like *Bard's Tale* had lots and lots of text in it. Stackpole wrote all this text for me. Then I did two levels of compression for all the art: one was a Prepros and then I did Huffman compression on it. All these little tricks I did made this game – all that game – able to fit on three discs.

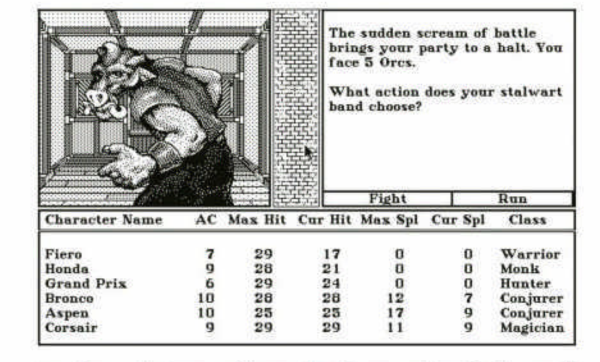
***The Bard's Tale* was a series famous for how difficult it was, had this been intentional from the beginning?**

The difficulty of *Bard's Tale* and *Bard's Tale II* was because of Cranford. He told me how in *Dungeons & Dragons* the DM is also a player, so when you get a group of people playing *Dungeons & Dragons* and you have the party of adventurers, each one played by a person at the table and then you have the Dungeon Master – and if the party is all killed then the Dungeon Master wins. The total party kills, they like to call them in *D&D*. He liked to do this in his games too. And so *Bard's Tale* was very difficult, because you start with your party and you need to go down a street to get to the trading post to get weapons and the game had no sense in there to determine that you don't have any weapons and so you shouldn't be attacked. But instead, no, you can actually walk down out of the Adventurer's Guild to go to Garth's Equipment Shoppe but as you go there you can get attacked and, since you don't have any weapons, you get murdered. He thought it was cool, and said that it put a lot of tension into the characters. I'm of the design that I want you to have fun in this world; yes there will be danger, but I'm not going to make it so that it feels unfair.

I HAVE NOT KEPT IT A SECRET THAT I'VE BEEN WANTING TO MAKE BARD'S TALE 4 FOR OVER A DECADE

A fourth *Bard's Tale* game was in development – before the new Kickstarter, anyway – what were your plans for it?

Oh my god, that was a story. It was about business, that's what morphed *Bard's Tale IV* into *Dragon Wars*. See, as soon as I finished *Bard's Tale III* I then went ahead and started doing ports: I did the C64, the IBM version, just other versions of *Bard's Tale III*. Afterwards I started immediately working on *Bard's Tale IV*, Paul Connor was brought in, because Mike Stackpole was unavailable to do the story, and he was setting it like it was on the planet





The artwork for the game was very impressive at the time, very detailed and – when animated – added a lot to the experience.



■ After EA blocked Interplay from creating a *Bard's Tale* game, the fourth game – and all its upgrades and improvements – had to be turned into a totally new franchise.

Sirius-B and I was like, 'Do we really need this stuff? It's a fantasy game, I don't care about it.' But we started working on it, and because it was intended to be a *Bard's Tale* game it was all about land combat and stuff, and with this game I actually took it further. I actually wrote the entire game, combat and everything, in the interpreted language so that the engine – the code engine – got so small that I actually had room for bigger art. It was a huge graphical advance. There was even a version I had that has sunrise and starfields, but I had to cut that out because I ran out of room and time.

HEINEMAN'S NEXT PROJECT…

> "■■■ *Dragons Of The Rip* is essentially a clean sheet of paper. Imagine, if you will, what if after *Dragon Wars* [there was] a *Dragon Wars 2* and then *DW3* and so on, what would *Dragon Wars 9* look like? The whole thing is based on an overall plot in a fantasy world – and there are twists in it in which it's fantasy people living in a rustic type environment but they have technology. It's driven by magic; so they have computers, ATMs and they do their taxes and all that other stuff, but they're still living in villages and castles."

What happened to turn what was then *Bard's Tale IV* into *Dragon Wars*?

Well Interplay had made enough profit off *Wasteland* and *Bard's Tale III* that we became a publisher, but we still needed to find a distributor for our first published games *Battle Chess* and *Neuromancer* because we didn't want to make the packages. So Brian spoke to EA: distributed by EA, published by Interplay. But at this time a company called Mediagenic – which is another name for Activision – came back and said, 'You know, you guys made us so much money on *Tass Times In Tonetown*, *Borrowed Time* and all those – come back, come back! And you know that percentage that EA was going to take? We'll take less; it'll make you more money. At EA you'll just be one of many games, at Mediagenic you'll be one of our stars.' Well with that Brian signed a deal that we were going to be publishing *Battle Chess* and *Neuromancer* through Mediagenic distribution. The problem was that our deal with EA for *Bard's Tale* and *Wasteland* was that we did it as contractors where the IP for these games becomes EA's property. So EA said they wouldn't publish *Bard's Tale IV* if we didn't sign the distribution deal. Brian didn't sign the contract, and so there was a meeting telling us we weren't doing any more work for EA on that series. And of course that meant with *Bard's Tale IV* we couldn't use the [*Bard's Tale*] name, we had to create a new IP.

Did you ever try to make a fourth *Bard's Tale* game after that?

I have not kept it a secret that I've been wanting to make *Bard's Tale IV* for over a decade. I even made a demo of it that ended up on YouTube about five or six years ago that we sent to EA back in 1999. We didn't know at the time when we were submitting ideas to do *Bard's Tale IV*, that EA was actually working on a *Bard's Tale IV*.

And that also never saw release?

What had happened was that after the rift had occurred between Interplay and EA, EA had a small team that was working on another *Bard's Tale IV* and was developed in-house at EA. And they worked on it for about three or four years. They have since told me how badly managed it was, the game itself had no real direction. It just kept meandering along until eventually an executive just came in and said, 'You know what, we're never going to ship this, just kill it.' And at that point EA had a real bad taste in their mouth about the franchise because even though it made them a boatload of money when Interplay was working on it, EA's attempts to do their own variant on it just met with a very expensive failure. So when I was trying to pitch it, I didn't know the producer I was pitching it to was also the guy who killed *Bard's Tale IV* and was like, 'We really don't want to go on this franchise, trust me on this.'

Deus Ex's fiction was based on a number of very real conspiracy theories, notably those relating to Area 51, the Majestic 12 and the John F. Kennedy assassination.

GAME CHANGERS

DEUS EX

Released: June 17, 2000 **Publisher:** Eidos Interactive **Developer:** Ion Storm **System:** PC, Mac, PS2

17 years on from its release the influence of this immersive sim is still felt today throughout the industry, but what is it that made the original Deus Ex so potent?

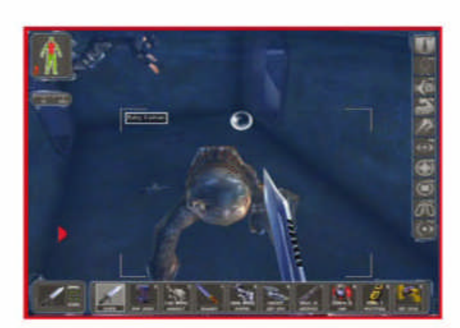
DESPITE EXISTING FOR over two decades, the 'immersive sim' is still difficult to define. But, for many, it is the quintessential gaming experience; a genre that houses but a handful of games, many of which are widely considered to be among the best ever committed to code. These games are complex constructions, wildly ambitious efforts that eschew common design and narrative practices to create experiences unlike any other – as if it is yours, and yours alone, to command and dismantle. Where Looking Glass Studios first breathed life into the genre with *Ultimate Underworld* – and later refined it in *Thief and System Shock* – it is Ion Storm's *Deus Ex* that continues to stand as the brilliant culmination of the concept.

In life, be it directly or otherwise, we are forced to make choices and decisions that have a real (and often inconsequential) effect on our lives and the lives of those around us every day. The same can't be said about the majority of the game worlds we escape into. Most offer but an illusion of choice and freedom – such is the folly of using linear storytelling tools in a distinctly non-linear entertainment environment. That is not true of *Deus Ex*. Debuting in 2000, it presented freedom of choice right from the off, designed to be an all-encompassing experience within a deeply simulated environment; the result was a world that *felt* real, every second you spend exploring it another breath of life into its lungs.

What kind of game do you want to play? That's the question *Deus Ex* quietly asks every one of UNATCO's new recruits. It may thrust a gun into your hands early on and force you into a first-person perspective, but there is no need to play *Deus Ex* as an FPS. Sure, it *can* be a traditional shooter if that's your style, but there's so much more to it than that – so long as you're willing to see how far the game's systems will bend. Play it as a stealth-action or an adventure

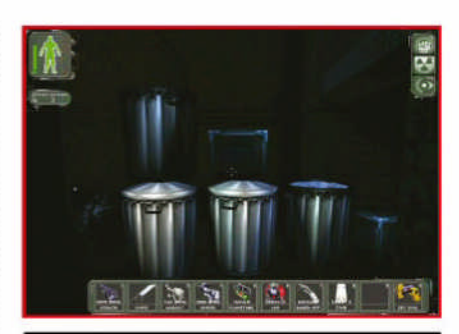
SKILL POWER

THREE BEST SPECS AND AUGS TO BUILD THE VERY BEST JC DENTON



SWIMMING

★ While it's true that tipping points into the Swimming skill is considered to be a bit of a joke, there's also a freedom to being able to explore the depths of levels without fear of your lungs filling with water. An underrated skill worth investing in.



MICROFIBRAL MUSCLE

★ At the beginning of *Deus Ex*, JC Denton is a little weak. Start to build up your Microfibral Muscle, and you'll quickly find yourself lobbing items around the environment with no trouble, creating new pathways and routes out of every day items you find in the alley.



LOCK PICKING

★ *Deus Ex* is known for its secrets, and that's why pouring skill points into Lock Picking is an absolute must. There's nothing worse than coming face to face with a locked door, ensuring your ability to get into unopened areas is almost as important as hacking.

game, rely on hacking or your mastery of machines, it's up to you. You can combine all of these play styles (and more) together or none of them at all, instead opting to build your spec around a proficiency in swimming – sure, that won't help you much when the Men In Black come a-calling but it sure does make for an interesting experience.

■■■ *Deus Ex* is the kind of game that spawns a decade of anecdotal stories because, largely, no two playthroughs would be the same. At the time, its depth and scope were staggering; even today it offers a level of freedom that's relatively unrivalled. The intended effect of all of this being that players could choose who they wanted to be in Ion Storm's shadowy, cyberpunk-infused world and for the game to react accordingly. This is how *Deus Ex* pushed past the likes of *System Shock II* and *Thief II*. No longer were we simply interacting with a game world, but influencing it too. It's one of the first games of its kind to feature dialogue and gameplay choices that have direct and consequential effects on the narrative – major characters could be killed, NPCs would react to your actions accordingly and the allegiance of entire factions would shift subtly over time. Or, you know, you could just walk around the women's bathroom and get verbally torn to shreds in the office by your boss. Like we said, when it comes to *Deus Ex*, it's up to you to define your own JC Denton.

JC Denton is one of *Deus Ex*'s biggest curiosities; the game makes it clear that you taking on the role of an established, grounded character in its world, but doesn't actually establish who they are outside of name and attire – a blank slate behind a familiar face. You are asked to exist in a world of dark skies and darker conspiracies; you'll come face to face with the Illuminati, sinister government agencies and conflicted corporations all the while sporting a set of sunglasses and wielding an array of otherworldly augmentations. It's ridiculous and yet there's something that feels oddly believable about it.

This, we are afraid, is the part where we harp on about 'immersion'. Many games claim to have it, but few are able to follow through on the promise. *Deus Ex* has it, and it's all because of its beautiful mess of intertwining systems. Ion Storm built an elaborate, believable, and systemic game world that dutifully keeps track of your actions and decisions; an array of interconnected systems, from simulated physics to surprisingly smart AI routines, ensure that *Deus Ex* reacts in a way that feels real, rather than virtual. It has a strong sense of embedded logic and carefully crafted mechanics that ultimately empower the player to feel as if they have a true sense of agency over the action that is unfolding. The map design is phenomenal, ensuring nearly every path of approach to any given objective felt viable, while sound and environmental cues helped build a narrative and web of intrigue outside of conversational dialogue and heavy-set conspiracy exposition.

Deus Ex was truly ahead of its time. Many have attempted to carry on its legacy, though few have been able to successfully locate and replicate its magic. It's a shooter that never forces you to fire a bullet, a game defined by choice on a linear pathway, and a sandbox that doesn't just give you sand to play with but the tools to build castles too. You'll never play another game quite like *Deus Ex*; it's a true testament to the power and potential of interactive entertainment, even today.

DEUS EX IS THE KIND OF GAME THAT SPAWNS A DECADE OF ANECDOTAL STORIES, BECAUSE NO TWO PLAYTHROUGHS WOULD BE THE SAME

KEY FACTS

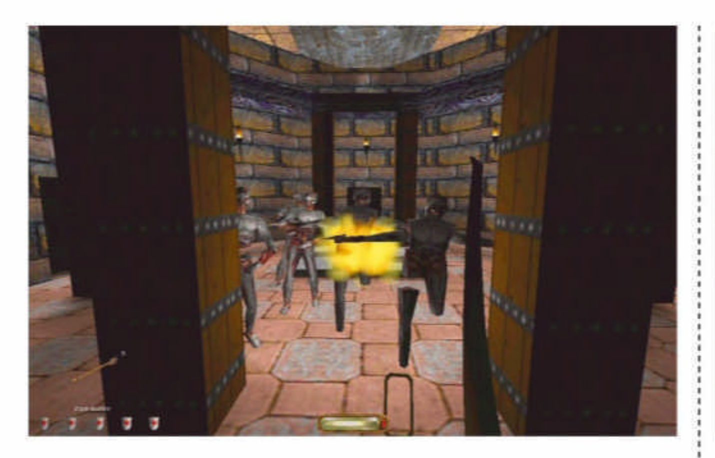
■ It's possible to complete *Deus Ex* without ever once drawing your gun from its holster. No matter how hard you push against the game's design, players willing to engage with their imaginations will find that they are rewarded for their creativity and ingenuity.

■ The World Trade Centre towers were excluded from *Deus Ex's* New York skyline due to technical limitations, with the studio justifying the decision within its narrative by laying blame on a terrorist attack, a full 15 months before 9/11.

GAME CHANGERS

THE DECISION IS YOURS

EIGHT OF THE MOST IMPRESSIVE IMMERSIVE SIMS



THIEF: THE DARK PROJECT

■ This first-person stealth adventure was groundbreaking in so many ways. It was one of the first PC stealth games to use light and sound as central game mechanics, with its first-person perspective opening up a whole new avenue of intuitive design and approach to designers and players alike. While it focused heavily on stealth, its sublime AI, level and mechanical design makes it a must play.



DEUS EX

■ With its truly incredible array of tactical opportunities, continually evolving narrative and incredible sense of place and purpose, *Deus Ex* quickly established itself as *the* immersive sim to play. It leant entirely on player choice, built in such a way that any decision you made could be supported so long as you had the relevant skill and augmentations to support it. *Deus Ex* is a truly groundbreaking title that is yet to be bested.



SYSTEM SHOCK 2

■ Created in partnership between Looking Glass Studios and Ken Levine's Irrational Games, *System Shock 2* is unquestionably one of the best games of all time. It elevated itself above the original by providing an unparalleled sense of place, drowning the player in its terrifying, mystifying atmosphere. *System Shock 2* does a great job of undermining you at every step of the way, a true subversion of the immersive sim concept.



ULTIMA UNDERWORLD

■ Blue Sky's first-person RPG may just be one of the most ambitious games of all time; it's astonishing, actually. Released in 1992, the dungeon crawling RPG took place in a sprawling 3D open world in which quests could be completed in any order, featured an array of varied combat options and introduced survival mechanics into play some 20 years ahead of them becoming vogue.





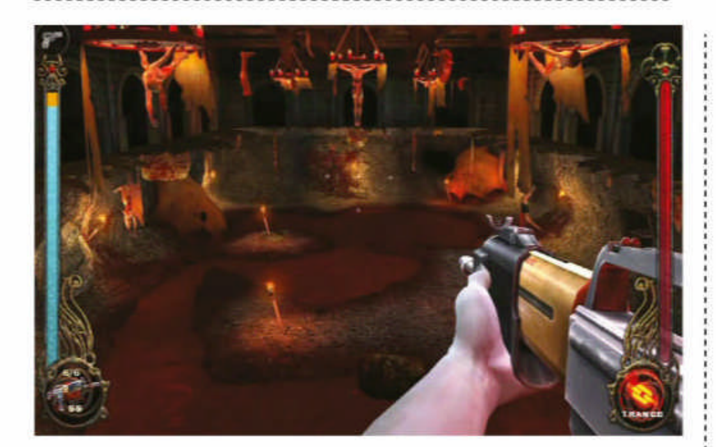
BIOSHOCK

■ *BioShock* is so heavily in the debt of the immersive sim that it couldn't not make the final cut. While the game is often remembered for its vibrant underwater architecture and ingenious narrative twist, it's its unparalleled sense of place, environmental storytelling and huge variety of emergent encounters that keep it close to the heart. Irrational Games was able to bring the immersive sim to a mainstream audience.



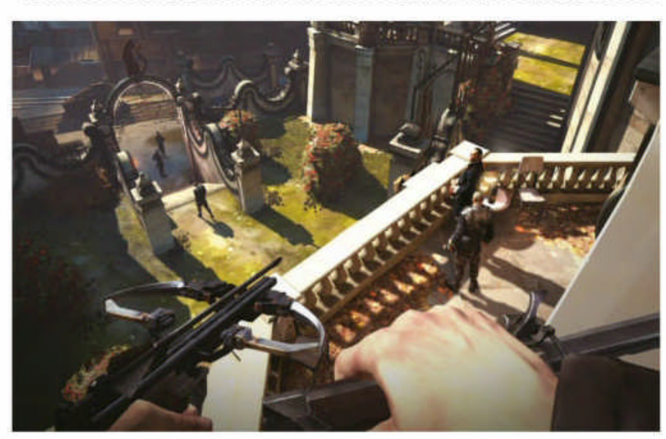
THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION

■ While many will think of *The Elder Scrolls* franchise as straight-up RPGs, *Oblivion*'s 'go anywhere and do anything' mantra ensured that players were able to tackle the game in any way that they see fit. In abandoning traditional character classes, *Oblivion* let you tailor-make your own personal hero, taking on a wide variety of quests and exploration tasks across the gorgeous landscape of Cyrodiil.



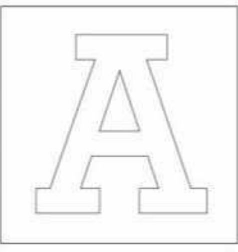
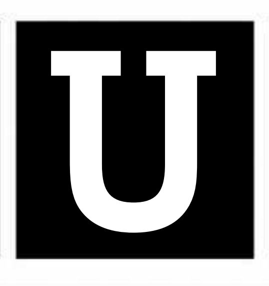
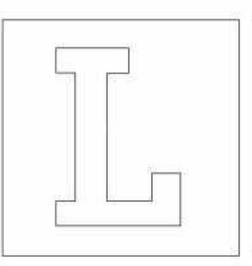
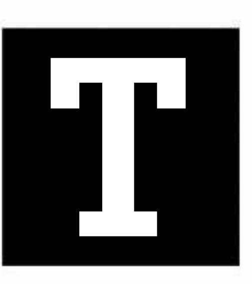
VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES

■ Perhaps a contentious inclusion to the list, but *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* is something of a flawed gem. Released in 2004, this fascinating immersive sim arrived with a gorgeous world; a hugely diverse set of gameplay opportunities and an interesting take on tired vampire mythos.



DISHONORED

■ *Dishonoured* kickstarted a new wave of immersive sims in 2012; landing just a year out from the divisive *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, *Dishonoured* drew from the level and stealth system design of *Thief II* and melded it perfectly with the open-ended play that helped popularise the original *Deus Ex*. It was a brilliant return to form for *Deus Ex* designer Harvey Smith.

THE 

NINTENDO SWITCH

MANUFACTURER: **NINTENDO** PRICE: **£279.99**



As a portable the Switch is an incredible machine and at home it does a fine enough job. The controller layout isn't perfect, though.

We don't know about you, but we're hoping Nintendo will release the docks separately so we can have them littered around the house.

IN THE SWITCH Nintendo has unleashed its most desirable (and powerful) device ever onto the world. By its very nature, the Switch is a premium product; the direct antithesis to the child's play design of the Wii U and laboured look of the outdated 3DS. A beautiful, vibrant, capacitive multi-touch 1280x720 screen is flanked by two lightweight, detachable controllers (called *shudder* Joy-Cons) that enable robust multiplayer/co-operative experiences and stunning triple-A gaming both on the move and in the home.

The modular design, despite looking like it could be the console's greatest gimmick, is in fact its greatest strength – perfectly bridging the gap between console and handheld play. Whether you're using Switch from the sofa – plugged away safely in the included dock that beams the picture from screen to the TV – or in handheld mode on the move (or in your bed), it never fails in its job of enabling comfortable, capable gaming.

The Joy-Con controllers, in spite of their size, are deceptively impressive pieces of technology; Nintendo has been able to cram motion sensors, incredible HD rumble and positioning technologies inside, though perhaps it is their responsive and versatile nature that makes them oh so appealing. All of this comes together to build a picture of a console with a rare confidence – the capacity to reshape gaming as we know it.

Still, some slight issues hamper an otherwise stellar launch, such as a minimal built-in storage capacity, a disappointing 32GB, a quarter of which is taken up by the OS, limited online functionality, inconsistent connectivity issues with the left Joy-Con and a highly-scratchable screen are a slight cause for concern.

That all said, the Switch is an absolute delight to use. A confident and capable console – encompassing some of the smartest tech in the industry – that all comes together to demonstrate that Nintendo is still more than ready to challenge the market with bold ideas and bright new initiatives.







NINTENDO SWITCH PRO CONTROLLER

SOLD BY: **NINTENDO** PRICE: **£59.99**

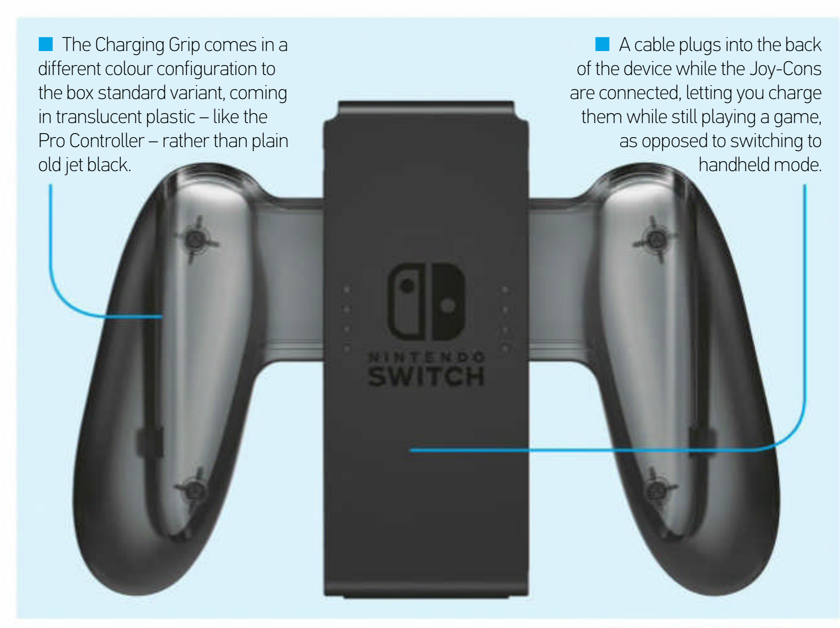
AS WONDERFUL AS the Joy-Con controllers are to use, there are some experiences that are made all the better with a traditional controller in your hands. It owes a clear debt to the incredible Xbox 360 controller; it's almost the exact same size and shape, a little lighter and even more attractive, thanks to the grey plastic transparent circuit board body. Coming with offset thumbsticks, large face buttons and a responsive D-pad as standard, Nintendo has done right by games looking for something more substantial when approaching titles like *The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild* and *Splatoon 2*.

Offering a, quite honestly, staggering, 30-40 hour battery life – a revelation when compared with the DualShock 4's eight-hour run time – support for motion control, HD rumble and built-in amiibo functionality, it continues Nintendo's tradition of strong controller support for its systems following the release of the GameCube's Wavebird way back in 2002. The price tag might catch your bank balance off guard, but the Pro Controller is a welcomed alternative to the Joy-Con configurations when it comes to taking your game time a little more seriously.
store.nintendo.com



Handling the Myahm Agana shrine in *BOTW* with little trouble, the motion control/gyroscope support works perfectly fine; *Splatoon 2* ready, basically.

This is a serious nitpick, but the Z-triggers don't depress as much as we'd like them to. It can be difficult to differentiate them from the shoulder buttons.



The Charging Grip comes in a different colour configuration to the box standard variant, coming in translucent plastic – like the Pro Controller – rather than plain old jet black.

A cable plugs into the back of the device while the Joy-Cons are connected, letting you charge them while still playing a game, as opposed to switching to handheld mode.

NINTENDO SWITCH JOY-CON CHARGING GRIP

SOLD BY: **NINTENDO** PRICE: **£24.99**

SHOULD YOU BE adverse to laying down the cash for the Pro Controller, The Nintendo Switch does actually include a handy controller configuration straight out of the box in the form of a handy grip. This thing lets you slot each Joy-Con into one central chassis and creates a – somewhat cramped – controller for you to use if you aren't a fan of holding the two Joy-Cons separately whilst sitting on your couch. Here's the thing, though: the one out of the box doesn't charge the Joy-Con controllers and it's a *pain*.

As it stands the only way to charge the Joy-Con controllers is when they are slotted onto the Switch screen, a nightmare if you were looking to relax, kick it on the big screen and game from a distance. Nintendo has subsequently released this Charging Grip, coming with a built-in battery pack that'll charge your Joy-Cons as you play. As a purchase, it honestly feels a little redundant – the money better put towards a battery pack or Pro Controller. *That said* it'll certainly help you out in a bind.
store.nintendo.com



EVERYWHERE MESSENGER BAG

This officially-licensed carrying case keeps your Switch safe on the go, designed for maximum portability and provides ample protection for those times you need to keep the console on you for impromptu gaming sessions wherever you are.
www.store.nintendo.com



HORI TOUGH POUCH

One of the most reliable accessory makers out there, Hori has released one of the best Switch pouches available, prioritising protection above all else. It holds the Switch, attached Joy-Cons and up to five games.
www.hori.co.uk



ALL IN ONE ARMOUR CASE

A little on the large side, the All In One Armour case is designed to not only keep your Switch safe but ensure you're never without the essentials. It can not only pack in the system, but up to four games, charging cable and a Pro Controller.
www.subsonic.com





INDEPENDENT BY DESIGN: ART & STORIES OF INDIE GAME CREATION

PUBLISHER: **INDEPENDENT BY DESIGN LTD**

IN THE LAST decade, the 'indie games' moniker has come to represent some of the most progressive and creative videogames we've ever seen. The rise of the independent developer has invited new ideas and original concepts into a medium long defined by cautious iteration and careful evolution – creativity constrained by budgets and player expectations. It's an exciting time, and that's why it's so great to see a publication dedicated to 26 of the brightest creative minds and most innovative studios in the world.

Independent By Design provides a unique insight into the stories and artistry behind some of the industry's biggest successes; a gorgeous hardcover book that's released off of the back of a successful Kickstarter, authored by sometime **game™** contributors Stace Harman and John Robertson. The presentation is part of the charm here, with long-form features existing alongside sequence spreads detailing the various faces of *Papers, Please* to original sketches from the archives for titles like *Hotline Miami*, *Prison Architect* and *FTL: Faster Than Light*.

It's a book of stories; revelations and insight into some of our favourite games, a true tribute to independent gaming. If you want to peer behind the triple-A gaming curtain and see what it takes to create a successful indie project – the blood, sweat and tears, straight from the creators themselves – then you'll want to bring *Independent By Design* into your life.

www.titanbooks.com

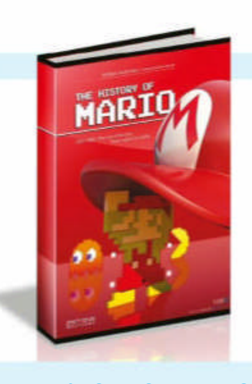




THE LITTLE BOOK OF ZX SPECTRUM GAMES

Have you ever been in a situation where you want to dish out ZX Spectrum knowledge to people on the street but your smartphone is dead? No, we haven't either, but were said situation to arise *The Little Book of ZX Spectrum Games* would be the perfect solution.

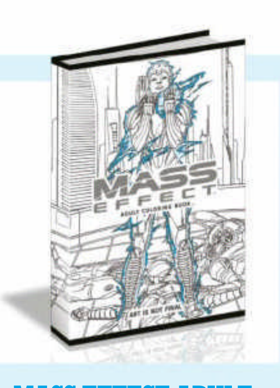
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THE HISTORY OF MARIO

Author William Audureau endures a deep dive into the history of one of gaming's biggest icons, Mario. This engaging read, cast across 400 pages, sees Audureau tracking the creation and rise of Nintendo's mascot between 1981 to 1991, giving you the opportunity to learn a few things and revel in nostalgia.

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Printing & Distribution
Printed by Southernprint Ltd, 17-21 Factory Road, Upton Industrial Estate, Poole, Dorset, BH16 5SN

Distributed in the UK, Eire & the Rest of the World by
Marketforce, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London, E14 5HU
☎ 0203 787 9060 www.marketforce.co.uk

Distributed in Australia by Gordon & Gotch Australia Pty Ltd, 26 Rodborough Road, Frenchs Forest, New South Wales 2086
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ISSN 1478-5889





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